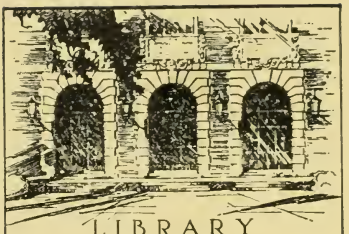

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TRUE WOMEN.

A Love Story.

BY

KATHARINE STUART.

"Not free from faults, nor yet too vain to mend."

POPE—*Essay on Criticism.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London:
SAMUEL TINSLEY,
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TRUE WOMEN.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. BLIGHT AND HER BURDEN.

Trust not yourself; but your defects to know,
Make use of every friend—and every foe.

POPE (*Essay on Criticism*).

"A MOST unhappy woman" Mrs. Blight called herself, and as a most unhappy woman we present her to our readers.

Not because her means were smaller than those of most of her neighbours whom she detested; nor because she was the mother of four plain daughters and two unruly, idle sons;

nor even because she was a widow; but because her nature was of that hopeless, unhappy kind which could only put the worst construction upon the thoughts, words, and deeds of her fellow-creatures.

Her nature knew not the blessed influences of Hope, Faith, and Charity; and, wanting these influences—the three true graces of Christian womanhood—her career was of necessity a ceaseless struggle with untoward circumstances and mortifying mistakes. Mrs. Blight was indeed a most unhappy woman.

As a young girl, Martha Eliza Grundy had seemed reserved only, and slightly suspicious of her fellow-creatures. But as a wife, with more opportunity of showing her true nature, her hopeless distrust developed rapidly; and the cares of a family brought out her despairing hopelessness in all its appalling repulsiveness. She never rested, nor let those about her rest. She never knew the sweet repose of

folding her hands when weary, while thinking that every one about her was doing their best.

In the pithy descriptions of her dependents, she was "that *dreadful* suspicious" at home, and "an awful worrit" to such sufferers as poverty or sickness had placed at her mercy.

"Twins to start with, and four more in five years; and Dr. Blight sick upon my hands the whole time," was wretched Mrs. Blight's mysterious record of her early married life.

We know of but one fate to equal it—one that stands out so clearly from the mists of heroic antiquity, that it seems to belong to our own experiences, though we seldom use its moral as well as we might.

We allude to the story of Pandora, with all her best gifts and graces turned to evils and let loose upon her at her inauspicious nuptials. Few of us try to realise how bravely she bore up, with Hope alone left at the bottom of her rifled casket.

The fable is worthy the attention of every married woman, but especially of every one who finds herself and her good gifts wasted on an uncongenial spouse. We trust that to each such sufferer a little prattling Pyrrha may bring Love to the aid of Hope, and soothe the aching heart and weary hours.

Perhaps Mrs. Blight had never heard of Pandora, the heroic Eve of heathen history; at any rate, *she* had smothered Hope at the very outset of her married life; and from that moment everything went wrong with her; and then her increasing family, and Dr. Blight's long illness, were only what might have been expected.

There are sorrows that are sacred; and our pen shrinks from describing Dr. Blight's long penance, and the miseries of his married life, chained as he was to that hopeless and uneasy body: a body devoid, figuratively speaking, of all soul.

But Mrs. Blight as a wife was harmless, compared to Mrs. Blight as a widow.

On Dr. Blight's death the worst traits of her character developed themselves with a rapidity known only to malignant diseases. There was now no antidote to her poison, and she became truly the scourge of her neighbourhood.

Dr. Blight had been the true friend as well as medical adviser of most of his opulent neighbours, and the untiring benefactor of such as were needy.

His gentle, compassionate sympathy for all sin and suffering insured him a welcome in every house; and the tears shed by all classes of his patients blinded both rich and poor for a time to their chief danger in losing him.

Before the first burst of cordial condolence with his family had died away, his widow had forced herself afresh on the toleration of the many; and upon the timidity of a few she

had imposed herself as an authority in his place.

Her visits were searching and terrible to all. She spared neither sex nor age, gentle nor simple.

Her onslaughts were against human nature in general, and her weapons triple-edged, and poisoned with Envy, Hatred, and Malice. "It was no use for any of her neighbours to try to conceal anything from her," she said; she could "see into the very depths of their deceitfulness." She could "sift people's consciences to their very dregs." And from those dregs, conjured up by her cruel suspicions, she forthwith proceeded to judge them, and, with the help of an ultra-pious friend, Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy, a widow almost as hopeless and desperate as herself, to publish their conviction to society at large.

It was not to be expected that Mrs. Blight kept what she considered her proper position

in the parish of Rippleford without superhuman struggles, and many a sad blow.

Some of her neighbours kept all their patience for Dr. Blight's orphans, and snubbed his widow courageously.

One saucy young beauty openly declared she "would as soon think of taking an artist's *lay figure* for her guide, philosopher, and friend as Mrs. Blight! It would have quite as much heart," she said, laughing, "and look quite as motherly!" And her hearers found that those few saucy words described admirably their own unspoken impressions of their hard and heartless neighbour.

Sooner than endure the misery of living with her, Mrs. Blight's son-in-law, Mr. Stephen Long, had thrown up her husband's wide-spread and excellent family practice. Indeed the unhappy young man had fled from home, and deserted his wife; and this most unhappy young wife, Christina Long,

was the eldest of Mrs. Blight's twins, and the chief weight of Mrs. Blight's burden.

The eldest of the unwelcomed twins. A small, pale, graceful, and gentle creature; called by the servants and the poor, who alone knew her, "the very image of her father!" and said by them to inherit his patience, his kind heart, and tender toleration for the weakness of others.

If Dr. Blight's life had been spared, his poor little Christina's fate would have been brighter. The young people married with his hearty consent. He thought highly of Stephen Long, the son of an old friend, and his own favourite and steady assistant; and what match could have been more fitting for his quiet, domestic little daughter?

"Stay and help me, Stephen," he urged with frank cordiality. "Take the place of an elder son, and don't rob me of my daughter, there's a good fellow."

And Stephen Long, feeling strong and

hopeful, had responded to his father-in-law's hand-clasp by a hearty promise to repay his kindness as an honest man should. And for a time who so happy as the Doctor in watching his pale girl grow into a rosy and almost pretty woman!

But after the good Doctor's death, poor Stephen Long's affairs went wrong.

In hopes of getting away from the home Mrs. Blight now made unbearable to him, and of making money and an independence rapidly, Stephen was tempted to join a friend in taking a farm.

They failed, of course, and Stephen's small patrimony was lost; and he found himself saddled with the debts of a dishonest partner, for so the friend turned out.

Owing to Mrs. Blight's unhappy failing of making the worst of everything, an unfair share of blame and even discredit fell upon Stephen Long in his trouble.

The young people were forced to accept the grudged hospitality (we cannot find a more appropriate term to describe the shelter given to them) of Mrs. Blight for one half of the year, and of Mrs. Long, Stephen's mother, for the other half. What each of the married pair had in turn to bear from their mothers-in-law is easier imagined than described.

At the end of little more than two years from Dr. Blight's death, Stephen Long disappeared, and if only a tenth part of what Mrs. Blight stated were true, Christina should have rejoiced to be rid of him! But poor Chrissy lay at the point of death, fretting for a little infant whose face she had never seen; while her mother proclaimed aloud its father's iniquities, and her mother-in-law asserted as loudly,

"*She* has no heart! for she is every inch a Blight!"

It was a sad story, but a very short one—the

story of a ruined, reckless man, and a broken-hearted woman, and a little baby's grave without a name in the corner of Rippleford churchyard, which was "kept and cared for," and planted with tiny, unpretending wild flowers by loving but invisible hands.

CHAPTER II.

POOR CHRISTINA LONG.

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; but when the desire cometh, it is as a tree of life.—PROVERBS xiii. 12.

SHORTLY before his death Dr. Blight had paid a visit to a dear and far-off cousin, and it was said had charged her to be kind to his poor girls if they ever needed a true friend. And this lady, who his wife declared had "jilted him in his foolish days, to say no worse of the double-faced thing," on hearing of Christina Long's piteous condition and rapidly failing health, after two years' weary separation from her husband, had hastened to fulfil her promise to her kinsman.

"My dears," Mrs. Bird said to her last-married daughter and son-in-law, who lived with her—"a man after her own heart," Mrs. Bird called him—"My dears, here is a letter from Mary Blight that I must answer in person. She should have written it months ago, in my opinion; but now it has come I will not let the grass grow under my feet, or waste a day in talking over what is to be done. Hear what she says." She read them Mary's letter. "Suppose I bring poor Christina Long home with me for change of air, while we devise some plan for restoring her to a home of her own again. Poor unhappy girl. What do you say, Frank?"

Frank being a man of few words, just looked up approvingly from his *Gardener's Chronicle*, smiled, and said:

"Go."

And his wife having given her consent with a sympathetic kiss and words of encou-

ragement, Mrs. Bird packed up and departed, eager with loving-kindness, strong in the remembrance of her old cousin's trust.

Mrs. Bird was a beaming, kindly little woman, whom unceasing efforts to do good alone kept from growing as broad as she was long.

She was for ever called by pet names by people who persisted in claiming relationship with her, as "Auntie" Bird, "Sis" Bird, or "Granny" Bird; and to these claims she responded heartily, having love for a million at least, as it seemed, in her warm and ever active heart.

Old Age himself seemed to be smitten with her tender, unselfish, trusting nature; he carried his frosts and his snows, his aches and his pains past her, and left her as rosy and as brown-haired and bright-eyed as her daughters; while he gave her an almost patriarchal group of descendants to mark

to her in his gentlest way how fast the time was flying.

The loss of her dearly-loved husband, Mrs. Bird spoke of as her one sorrow; and even that was borne bravely, for she looked upon death as the beginning, not the end of life!

"Every day brings me nearer to him," she used to say, with a hope of an eternal reunion which a weak-eyed young curate strove in vain to damp or daunt with fears of a more humble and orthodox nature.

Every one of us fails in grace one way or another; and Mrs. Bird, as a widow, could form no definite idea of a heaven in which she should not find again the best man she had known on earth, and she said so frankly to Mr. Stole.

"My dears," she would say to her children, with a mixture of indignation and humour that was characteristic of what she called her

battles royal with that melancholy and half-starved young man, "what more can that poor, silly young fellow know of heaven or of the Creator's hidden will than I do? If God ever blesses him with a wife and children of his own, let him come and talk to me *then*, and I will listen to him, and give *him* good advice, and nourishing food into the bargain, for I declare I do not believe he ever has half enough to eat."

And Mrs. Bird's belief was shown in endless gifts of good things, that she "supposed a young bachelor had no means of procuring without more trouble than they were worth." Fresh-laid eggs, sausages, and home-cured bacon for the hungry-looking high-church hermit's breakfast. Game, fowls, corned pork, and good port wine many times in the year, for the frail body's creature-comfort after his zealous ministrations among the poor. And at Christmas, Mrs. Bird's christian help

was poured out to the poor curate with a liberality that, at last, left him no possibility of doubting her devotion to the church, and healed all the breaches between them with a sovereign balm.

If Mrs. Bird had any other fault than want of faith—in the curate—it was in a reckless manner of dealing with the good things of this life without scruple, and without the slightest pretence of charity. When remonstrated with, she invariably explained her actions to be the promptings of her own conscience, regretting much that her neighbours should not understand them.

She could not enjoy her many blessings, she avowed, unless she *used* and *shared* them. But as for taking any credit for generosity,—*that* she gave the credit of alone to the poor and needy, who *denied themselves* in helping others!

Mrs. Bird was certainly not orthodox. Her

whole blameless life had not one particle of profession in it, and she refused to all men the right of dictating to her the mode in which her religious belief should show itself.

Mrs. Bird's children and children's children had come to believe that her religion consisted in doing courageously, and with untiring zeal, the duties that fell to her daily share. It seemed, indeed, as if she was helped and supported by a hidden strength and guide. A blessing followed the work of her hands; and the verse of the sweet Psalmist, "Eschew evil and do good: seek peace, and ensue it," she seemed for ever to hear and obey.

No wonder that Dr. Blight should have turned his thoughts towards this warm-hearted, and ready-handed, motherly cousin, when he thought of his approaching separation from his own daughters, and longed to secure her interest for them in time of need.

The time for concealment had passed; it was no breach of married confidence or loyalty if now he owned to part of the wretchedness of his life, and the haunting dread of his death, for the sake of the girls so soon to be left forlorn and fatherless.

What passed between Mrs. Bird and her old friend not even her daughters ever knew. But the leave-taking was remembered as one of the saddest that the porch of Mrs. Bird's sunny dwelling had ever held. Tears were in Mrs. Bird's eyes as she kissed the haggard face bent down to receive this silent seal to the promises no child even had heard. And the bent and aged-looking "playfellow" of the rosy woman who kissed him with tears in her eyes, went his way silently. He had no heart even to respond to the kindly words of his other relations; his last look was to the friend to whom he had at last confessed the long hidden miseries of his life.

And at last one of Mrs. Blight's unhappy daughters had written to ask Mrs. Bird's advice and help. The twin sister of the unhappy Christina Long had called her to come to their aid.

"Oh! Cousin Bird," poor Mary Blight had written; "If you cannot help us, I feel sure my darling will die! Do not think me wild to write this. Come and see for yourself."

When Mrs. Bird alighted at the staring 'White House' at the cross roads of Rippleford, after a journey of two hundred miles, she was as fresh as when she left home. As fresh as a rose, or a lark, or any other emblem of nature's brightness and joy.

Never was her advent more welcome than now. "Christina was in bed with one of *her* headaches," Mrs. Blight reported with an aggrieved air in place of a sympathetic sorrow. "She will neither eat nor speak. There she lies on her bed, as white as the

sheets, with her eyes shut. If you open the shutters to look at her, she turns her face away, and you can see the pulses in her throat go throb, throb, throb! I am sure I can't tell what ails her. Dr. Floyd says it is a mind diseased. A nice kind of physician he is, to hint such a thing and not try to cure her, or tell me what I ought to do. I am sure, the burden that girl has been to me from the day she was born! Teething to begin with, and measles, worse than all the others put together, and then her marriage! and now this *silent sickness*, as I call it. If you *can* rouse her, and get her to go with you for change of air, I'm sure I shall be as glad as any body."

"Cousin Bird," Mary whispered, with an almost hysterical hug on the landing, outside the invalid sister's door, "how good of you to come at once! But I fear nobody can help us! Nobody! It is all grief at Stephen's

cruel silence! He sends her money from time to time, but not a word with it! I found her, the day I wrote to you, in a dead faint, with one of these letters and all sorts of his little keepsakes, and the clothes she had prepared for the poor little baby in her lap and on the floor; and since then she has never complained, but I see that the pain is terrible!"

Mrs. Bird put her arm round the poor loving sister who told this simple story of Christina's grief, and kissed her silently; and the girl held back the sobs that were so hardly controlled, and spoke again:

"If you could only find out where Stephen is, and write him word. All she wants is to know he is well and happy—not money!"

"My dear," then said Mrs. Bird, "let me see Chrissy and give her a kiss, and tell her all I know of Stephen. He is well, and, I firmly believe, means well, and all will come right in time."

Mrs. Bird passed gently into the darkened room, and stole her way across to Christina Long's little narrow white bed—a world too wide, small as it was, for the reed-like figure lying on it. The poor girl heard the soft footfall beside her sister's, and strove to raise her head.

"Don't move, don't move, my dear!" was whispered in the visitor's most caressing tones. "I have only come to give you a kiss, and give you a little good news; when you are better we will talk more together."

The kiss was silently given and as silently returned, while Mary noiselessly placed a chair for their friend close by the bed, that Christina might still hold the hand she had taken into her own with a convulsive clasp.

"I heard quite by chance of Stephen lately," Mrs. Bird said, gently and slowly, after a few moments' pause. "He was well, and is gaining quite a reputation as a doctor again in Trinidad.

Trust me, my dear, your sorrow and his shall pass away. All will come right in time!"

Here a great sobbing cry burst from poor Christina. "Oh, my heart, my heart!" she cried, and she put her head on Mrs. Bird's soft arm, and wept and wept as a tired child on its mother's breast.

"Well! did you say? and well thought of? Oh, Stephen! my Stephen! How could I—— Mary! Mary! mamma must be wrong! Oh, forgive what I say! It was all, all my fault, Cousin Bird! Papa would never have let me believe anything against Stephen! He was so honest and true, papa called him *Mastiff* Long!"

"Let her cry, Mary, and pour out all her trouble," Mrs. Bird said, to reassure the trembling girl, who was frightened by this unusual outburst of Christina's pent-up woe. "She will be better afterwards. She has played the Spartan long enough. I never knew any

woman the better yet for allowing a fox to gnaw her body or mind. Let her cry."

"Dear cousin, has any one seen Stephen? Tell me all, dear cousin. My heart feels *starved.*"

"And so does Stephen's, my dear, I feel sure. But they shall both be fed, my dear, and filled with honest love once more, before I shall feel that I have kept my promise to your poor father. But now you must rest, my child, and then take a little food, and then try to sleep; and to-morrow we will lay our heads together, how to get at Stephen. He must be brought home, or you must be taken out to him. But you must tell me of your trouble from the very beginning, or I shall not know how best to help you."

"Shall I bring her some tea, Cousin Bird?"

"*Tea*, my dear Mary! Bring her a little wine and water and a bit of toast, unless you can get her half a cupful of soup. No tea, if

I can help it. A little strong soup, or roast chicken, or an egg beat up in half a glass of wine, for she looks exhausted. And have a fire lit, my dear."

"Poor, forsaken, fatherless girl," Mrs. Bird wrote to her own petted daughters. "There she lay in that cold long attic, with its ill-fitting doors and windows, and its two old fireplaces fitted up as cupboards. She has gathered into it all that remains of her ill-fated little home. I never saw such a whited sepulchre of a room as it was, so filled with the ghastly remains of long-lost happiness.

"My dears! I could have shaken Cousin Blight when I came downstairs. I was glad to go to my own room and wash my face, for I had cried over Christina. I had, indeed; for I never saw a sadder sight than the little black silk pad she wore to keep her wedding-

ring on her poor little worn finger. I am sure her mother is at the bottom of it all! Mother indeed! I could make as good a mother with flints and chalk!"

CHAPTER III.

"AND ALL UNCHARITABLENESS."

All seems infected that th' infected spy
As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye.
POPE (*Essay on Criticism*).

"WELL, now that I see how unchanged you are, and that the girls have only improved since we last met, let me hear of all my cousin's good friends—the neighbours," Mrs. Bird said cheerily to her grim hostess over their supper.

She knew well that if anything could stave off a catalogue of the thousand and one grievances Mrs. Blight had ready to enumerate against her burden, Christina, it would be a

general onslaught upon the other widows and orphans of Rippleford.

No one can have failed to notice how gregarious these "shorn lambs" are. In the safest and sunniest pastures they huddle together and add to one another's helplessness and misfortune by their vague unreasoning fears of man and wolf.

Rippleford was a perfect colony of widows and orphans, and it is of these the story is to be told.

"Let me hear of the nearest neighbours first, up the shady, lime-scented road, opposite Mrs. Loraine's great beeches, to the church. How are the ladies at Pendrills? I forget how Mr. Douglas Burleigh's scrape ended. Did he marry the pretty Spanish adventuress or not?"

"It ended better than any one expected," Mrs. Blight was forced to own; without showing any shame, however, at being forced

to take back the false coin she had circulated so freely.

"It was a marriage then? I should have been grieved if that fine, honest-looking English squire had proved a coward or a villain. After losing that sweet son, Willie, at the Redan, all Mrs. Burleigh's pride would naturally settle upon her only boy, Douglas."

"Well, yes! Mrs. Burleigh had to join in begging for Theresa Saavedra; the relations were as proud as peacocks, and would hardly give their consent. Mr. Burleigh brought his bride here for the honeymoon. She was all eyes, like a half-fledged young bird! but now she turns out to be a beauty and an heiress, not a Spanish creature at all. Her mother was a Miss Dillon till she ran away with Don Leo di Saavedra. Mr. Burleigh lives on his wife's estates in one of the northern counties, and leaves Mrs. Burleigh and Miss Madge Pendrills all to themselves.

He has four or five children, and they say he is properly henpecked, for her mother lives with them."

"And pretty, bright-eyed Madge?" Mrs. Bird asked eagerly; "how well I remember her pretty way of tossing back her sunburnt curls; what a dignified little fairy she was."

"Oh, she's here!" Mrs. Blight said grimly, "doing as much mischief, and flirting as hard as she can with young Guy Vernon of the Chase. I can't talk of her or her mother with any patience! *She* has a way of folding that old Indian shawl of hers round her when she rises to receive me, as if I chilled her. I long to ask her what she means by it. I see them as little as I can; but Louisa and Eliza pester me to keep on terms of civility."

"We are nearly cut off from all fun here by mamma's feuds," Eliza said.

Eliza Blight prided herself on her sincerity and accuracy, and managed to control her

mother and her vivacious sister Louisa in turns very usefully with the tight reins of fact.

"We are certainly hated wherever we go, and only asked out for papa's sake anywhere," she added with needless honesty.

"Or because people don't like to be too rude to mamma, for their own credit's sake," Louisa giggled; and Mrs. Bird hastened to stop their discordant duet by inquiring,

"Is it really to be a match, then, between the young giant, Mr. Vernon, and the fairy Miss Burleigh?"

"No one can make out," Mrs. Blight owned. "It would be a good thing if it was settled one way or the other. He is a great, red-haired reprobate; but then he is a great catch, and so Mrs. Burleigh has him for ever there."

"Oh, mamma!" Mary ventured to say, "ever since William Burleigh's death he

has been like a son among them at Pendrills."

"You know nothing about it, Mary; how should you! Mark my words, he will come to no good!" Mrs. Blight said solemnly; and no one ventured to break the silence that followed Guy Vernon's doom, till Mrs. Bird thought, at least there will be a kind word for Mr. Traill, the dear good Vicar, and said:

"And good Mr. Traill? Is he not married yet? The Vicarage wanted a mistress sadly."

"Who *would* marry him?" Mrs. Blight asked, with a snap. "He is afraid of his own shadow. He gives away all his money to designing women with large families, till he has not got a tidy coat to his back; and he goes about muttering Greek to himself all day long. Many people blame Sir Augustus Vansittart exceedingly for giving the living to such a scatter-brained old scholar, just because he was such a friend."

"Dear me!" laughed Mrs. Bird, "to think of my forgetting the two greatest neighbours of all, the lady of the Manor and her ungainly son! How are they?"

"Don't talk of him!"

"Poor fellow—is he dead?"

"No, indeed; but he was in the Divorce Court, and got out, no one knows how. By the husband running away, I believe. I wish you could hear Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy's account of him. Every one ought to know the story, she says. I thought at one time she would make a tract of it."

"Dear me! I hope she will not," Mrs. Bird said, with a very grave face. "Such grievous stories are better forgotten."

"What can be better than warning tracts?" Mrs. Blight asked, ready for battle.

"The fifth chapter of Matthew," Mrs. Bird answered readily. "I have given a shilling to every one of our people's little girls who can

say that through, slowly, and without any thoughtless mistake," she said, turning to Mrs. Blight's daughters as she spoke. "They repeat it to me every Christmas Eve, when they come to fetch their new red cloaks. They do look so pretty, standing all in a row, with their dear little faces in underneath the hoods."

"Good-night, Cousin Blight; good-night, girls. Mary dear, are you coming with me? That is kind."

"Come, tell me, Mary—for I did not dare to ask any more news of the neighbours from your mother—do you really see nothing of the dear people who loved your father so well? The Loraines, for instance, and old Mrs. Vernon?"

"Very little indeed," Mary was forced to own. "Chrissy and I never go out since her disgrace."

"*Disgrace!*" echoed Mrs. Bird, almost angrily. "There is no disgrace in her trouble,

child! and I would fain believe nothing but despair in Stephen's desertion. Upon my word, things are come to a pretty pass here, Mary, if Christina's affliction has been called her disgrace, for you can never have found such a word to apply to it yourself, Mary. I am sure of that. Don't cry, my dear. I came to comfort you, not to scold! Now, there's a good girl, smile again, and trust me; I came to comfort you both, and not to scold!"

And Mary smiled, and tried to believe in the comfort to come.

And as she crept silently to the little bed beside Christina's, later, and found the sick girl breathing softly in a sound and peaceful sleep, her eyes were again dimmed with irrepressible tears—but they were tears of thanksgiving. Christina's face was as full of peace as that of a sleeping child. As Mary watched her, the

sweet, sad mouth curved with a smile, and a whisper of "Stephen!" passed her lips, telling of a happy, and Mary prayed that it might be a prophetic, dream.

CHAPTER IV.

OUT IN THE FRESH AIR.

"In the green gleam of dewy-tassell'd trees."
TENNYSON (*Princess*).

"WILL you come with me, Mary? I am going to call on Mrs. Loraine," Mrs. Bird said suddenly, after pacing silently round and round Mrs. Blight's stiff garden next day after lunch, planning how she could best help poor Christina.

She had spent all the morning, this true and trusty friend, by Christina's narrow bed in the long attic; listening to the sick girl's story, from the very beginning of Stephen's troubles. Alas! they dated from the day of

Dr. Blight's death, and had increased rapidly till his despairing flight put him beyond the reach of misconstruction and calumny.

From Stephen's forlorn wife there fell no word of blame, except of her own weakness and ignorance. He had been to her all that he promised to be. His flight alone still seemed to her an act of wildness, akin to insanity; as wild as her own wild refusal to see him, of which she had been *told*. Much indeed of her story *was* what had been *told her* by Mrs. Blight. She had a terrible impression of seeing Stephen at the door, pushing his way between her mother and the nurse, who was guarding her, and of her screaming for help; and then of a long, long blank silence without peace, and of lying still without rest; and then of longing to see Stephen, to hear what had *really* happened; and then of hearing he was gone!

"Cousin Bird," the poor girl said, "do

you think I could have been mad? When I heard mamma say, 'Stephen is a wretch, and has deserted you! He is gone!' it seemed as if the words were roared at me through a speaking-trumpet, such as they speak with from ship to ship at sea. I do not know if the horrible things that I heard were told to me, or if I said them myself; but it seemed as if every wickedness I had ever heard or read of, was told of my Stephen. I cannot even ask Mary what happened. I will not do Stephen any further wrong if I can help it."

"My child," Mrs. Bird said wisely, "try to look upon all that time as a time of sick fancy and trial. Many a sane mind can be sick *almost* to madness, and yet be pure and loyal to its holiest instincts for ever afterwards. All that you have suffered has been borne by others, but, with tender care, no harm has come to the sufferers, as it has come to you and Stephen. He shall know of all

your sorrow; and he will best know how to guard you against any more such affliction."

"And my baby, Cousin Bird? *Was* anything wrong? was it *deformed?* Why was I not allowed to see it even? Forgive me! forgive me, Cousin Bird! but even now I feel that if I had but held it in my arms—*dead*—I could bear its loss more calmly."

"We will know that, too, my dear, before I leave you. I will see the woman that nursed you, and hear all I can of your infant, and you shall hear the truth, for truth I know is the only comfort in such cases. But why do you think of its being deformed, dear?"

"Because I heard them say it was a 'mercy it was taken!' It was cruel, cruel," she said, trembling with her recollections of that helplessness in such unfeeling hands; 'I heard such cruel things of Stephen and of our baby as I lay there."

"Well, they are all over. Let us try now

to think of more comforting facts. Of Stephen's well-doing in Trinidad; of his getting on again in the profession your father said he must distinguish himself in. He told me he hoped great things of Stephen, my dear. He had so clear a head, so cool a judgment, such a liberal mind, such powers of observation, such readiness in seizing facts, such firmness in grasping them. We shall all be proud of Stephen still, my Chrissy, I feel sure, for your father was a wonderful judge of character."

Even as she spoke, Mrs. Bird found herself overwhelmed by the remembrance of Dr. Blight's one great failure of judgment—his choice of Martha Eliza Grundy instead of herself, and she was speechless, with the sad story of the father and of his forlorn Christina weighing heavily on her heart.

"Come with me, Mary, to Mrs. Loraine's.

But first let us take a brisk walk. I must recover myself in the open air. I feel stifled with Christina's grief. Mrs. Loraine had a brother in Trinidad, I think I heard Stephen Long had gone to him. We may at least get at him through Mr. Ponsonby."

"Mrs. Loraine was kindness itself to Stephen," Mary said in answer to Mrs. Bird's remark. "But I dread calling at The Beeches, cousin. Mrs. Loraine must hate to hear our names. We slighted all her kindness; and we spread those cruel reports about Miss Loraine's jilting, or being jilted by Captain Franks, and young Mr. Meredith. Oh cousin! it has all been so very, very wretched since papa died. I little knew how strong his influence was over us all!"

"Don't say 'we,' child, or 'all of us.' Don't mix yourself up in things you have nothing whatever to do with. You and Christina have nothing to fear from your dear father's

true friends and neighbours. You must shake off your morbid dread of their dislike, and act for yourselves as your father's daughters. See what poor faint-hearted Chrissy has come to with her fear of saying '*No*' to your mother. You know what I mean, Mary? No woman grown, above all no married woman, has any right to give her conscience into even her mother's keeping. It makes my blood boil to hear that your mother so worked on that poor feeble girl's mind as to bring about a parting at such a moment. I have just heard the whole story, Mary, and Stephen Long must hear it too. Where were your brains, Mary, to say nothing of any pity for your poor brother-in-law, to let him be forced to leave without a good long talk with his wife?"

"She was so ill—" Mary began, with tearful eyes, startled by Mrs. Bird's vehemence.

"A pretty way, truly, to cure her! To

send her husband packing, and to refuse to let her see her baby."

"I was not allowed to enter the room, cousin. When I did, she asked for Stephen and the baby. Both were gone, you know, and then came the light-headedness, and fancies against Stephen. She raved——"

"She just very nearly died of the wickedness your mother put into her poor wandering mind!" Mrs. Bird interrupted again angrily. "Why, the joy of receiving one's infant is the most merciful compensation for the pains of maternity! Suppose *I* had invented lies and sent my sons one way and their infants another! a pretty churchyardful I should have had to contemplate by this time! But it was not your fault, my poor Mary. I am no better, indeed, than your mother to-day. Let us now go to Mrs. Loraine's, and see what can be done to repair the cruel, wicked mischief that has been made."

"I have been wrong—that is, very weak and selfishly afraid. I don't wonder you despise me," Mary Blight said dolefully, after thinking over what till now had appeared to her as her hard but filial duty.

"My dear, I do not despise you, and I believe you are neither weak nor selfish. Such another case, perhaps, never fell to any other daughter's share in this world. You could have no experience to guide you, and no old woman should tell a young one to take instinct or inclination as her guide in direct opposition to a parent. I have been unjust. But as for *despising* you, Mary—to know you is to love you—and poor Chrissy too! Remember what I say, for I mean it, and say only what I know to be true. Let me stop to enjoy those lovely glades of greensward, Mary, and all those groups and hanging beech-woods. How brightly the house and gardens flash out at every turn of this approach! I never know

which is the loveliest of the places round here, nor which of the cross-roads leads to the most beautiful bits. But if I had a carriage I think I should enjoy driving down past Lady Vansittart's great shining hollies to the Ripple, and across the ford, and away over Shepley Common, to enjoy the scent of the furze and the heather—the *incense of the waste*, I call it —most of all."

"I must ask leave to take you home by the Vicar's Walk, Cousin Bird, as you enjoy our beautiful bits here so much; that is one of the most beautiful in all Rippleford. They say Mr. Traill composes all his sermons there on his way to the Manor and back. Mrs. Loraine gives him a right of way through her American garden and wilderness to his friend Sir Augustus Vansittart's. The Vicar's Walk is a lovely green ride, mossy, and bright with tiny ground flowers. The larches sweep down to the ground on either side of it for nearly half

a mile.—It is so peaceful,—though the woods are full of game, and squirrels, and singing birds of every kind. No guns are ever allowed to be fired there, because Sir Augustus rears his pheasants at the new farm he bought, or rather Sir William, his father, bought, at Mr. Loraine's death. The bursts of song from the invisible birds there seem to me sweeter than anywhere else. To them it must seem a leafy heaven of safety. Don't laugh at me, cousin. I am often so wretched, I think if it were not for all the joy-giving proofs of the Almighty's goodness I see *out of doors*, I should die of despair."

"My poor Mary," Mrs. Bird said gently, "I can believe it, dear."

"The sight of Miss Loraine, too, does me positive good," Mary continued. "I wish I knew more of her."

"Is she still as like her lovely step-mother, and Grace as unlike mother and step-sister, as ever?"

"I think so," Mary answered. "But it is long since I have seen them together—in their home I mean. Whenever we do meet, Miss Loraine is so gentle and courteous, I cannot help fancying she knows how unhappy we are." She spoke almost in a whisper, for they were now mounting the steps to ring at Mrs. Loraine's great glass doors.

"How I love glass doors, and the welcome this bright hall gives one even before the doors are opened!" Mrs. Bird said, looking in eagerly upon the old-fashioned Turkey carpet and the old oak chairs with their flowered leather seats. "The sight of all those plants, and quaint carvings, and the rich old china, and that old, old clock, makes waiting here quite a delight. Ah, Ellis is still here! How portly he has grown! How do you do, Ellis? May we come in?"

Ellis's hearty welcome was hardly disguised under his conventional solemnity as he ushered

in the cousin and daughter of the still dearly-remembered Dr. Blight. He remarked, in tones of respectful reproach, "It is years since you have been among us, ma'am. I hope all your young ladies are well! MRS. BIRD, ma'am, and Miss Blight!"

CHAPTER V.

SIBYL LORAINE.

There's in you all that we believe of heaven,
Amazing brightness, purity, and truth,
Eternal joy, and everlasting love.

OTWAY (*Venice Preserved*).

SIBYL LORAINE would have no forced love, she said. Her very pets should be free, that their affection might be spontaneous and genuine. Her generosity and unselfishness fully equalled those of Pope's Eloisa, though happily she had never required to vaunt them so lustily.

Her pets just now were a flock of rainbow-tinted pigeons, and when Mrs. Bird and Mary entered the drawing-room they found Mrs. Loraine writing, and saw her step-daughter

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outside, feeding her birds under the broad verandah between the two conservatories flanking the garden-front of The Beeches.

The birds' wheeling flights in the autumn sunshine, their sudden down-flutterings, and eager pattering round their young mistress's feet, made the group a very animated one.

Very lovely Miss Loraine looked as she hastened in to welcome pale-faced Mary Blight with smiles and kindly greetings; and her first words brought a glow of comfort to her timid guest. "How long it is since we last met! How is Mrs. Long?"

With Sibyl's hand guiding her to a cosy seat, Mary bore unflinchingly Grace Loraine's half-sleepy, supercilious stare, as she half rose, half bowed, and then resumed a half-lying position on the sofa, and paid no further attention to her mother's visitors. She was soon again deep in the surging, tempestuous passions and thrilling intrigues of a

modern sensational novel; and the joys and sorrows of her neighbours, the realities of life around her, were nothing whatever to her.

Mrs. Loraine was deeply interested in Mrs. Bird's mission to Rippleford and The Beeches. Wishing to talk the subject over fully, she frankly proposed that Sibyl and Miss Blight should go away and leave them, a plan that gave to Mary, at least, an hour of unalloyed delight in the garden and hothouses in Sibyl's sweet society; and sent her home happy in the possession of tokens of sympathy for the sick Christina. Blossoms of strange beauty and subtle fragrance, and a bunch of wondrous Muscat grapes—with stalk and leaves that made it a perfect picture—almost as richly perfumed as the flowers.

What an amount of happiness had Sibyl Loraine packed into one tiny basket, Mary thought, as she received it from her beautiful

hands; for many a word of kind sympathy and remembrance accompanied the fruit and orchids.

Meanwhile the two elder ladies in the drawing-room had cordially agreed in laying all the blame of Christina Long's miserable plight on the two mothers-in-law, her own and Stephen's.

They hardly laid a fair share of blame on Stephen Long himself, we think; but then, as Mrs. Bird said:

"Abusing the man is not the best way to bring him home repentant. When once he has come back to his wife, we can tell him what we think of him, poor fellow."

Mrs. Loraine said:

"I believe I knew more of his misery than most of his neighbours. He quite broke down here one day. I cannot remember now what I did to affect him so deeply; but I know it pained me to see how unused he

had become to any little common kindness. He has a very tender heart. I think we need only write him what we both know of his wife's illness, and tell him the story you have told me to-day ; it will bring him home at once. If he does not hurry home I shall begin to believe in Mrs. Blight—I shall be truly grieved."

"Do you know his address ?" then asked Mrs. Bird.

"My brother's people will find him," Mrs. Loraine told her confidently. "He took charge —medical charge—of the English overseer and people on the Ponsonby Estate. He will soon be found. Meantime can we do nothing for his forlorn little wife ? How is it we never see her ?"

"Her sister Eliza, who tells the truth at least, though not always in the kindest manner, says she gardens all the spare time of her mornings, which is not much, at the

back of the house, and sews indoors all the afternoon, not to be seen. She declares Mrs. Long is their Cinderella. 'Everything disagreeable that nobody else will do, Chrissy has to do ; and the blessing of it is she does it without grumbling,' is Eliza's description of the patient Christina's life."

"Has she *no* pleasures, *no* consolations?" Mrs. Loraine asked with much feeling.

"She has Mary's devoted affection. But Mary, too, is utterly crushed," Mrs. Bird felt herself justified in revealing.

"It is truly appalling to see how much misery one such woman can cause. She is like the fabled Upas-tree, so deadly is her poison to all who come under its influence!" Mrs. Loraine said, omitting Mrs. Blight's name for fear of wounding poor Mary Blight, who just then returned, bright with the reflected happiness and the sympathy of the sunshiny Sibyl.

"Now, Mary, take my advice," Mrs. Bird urged as they slowly returned by the beautiful larch-ride to the cross roads and Mrs. Blight's comfortless home; "make the most of all your father's old friends and neighbours. All kindness is ready for you and Christina too, in Sibyl Loraine's home; and you would draw in new life there. How beautiful she is! I could hardly take my eyes off her. I thought at first her deep grey eyes were her greatest charm. But now I believe, after all, it is her mouth. What a sweet, tender, coaxing smile she has! I never saw such beautiful, sunny brown hair, and the way she coils it round and round that onyx-ball comb is inimitable. What quiet easy grace she moves with! I declare I never saw so lovely and lovable-looking a girl as Sibyl Loraine. I'm sure I hope I shall dream of her."

"I cannot tell you *how* kind she has been

to me," Mary said, showing her treasures. "See, these are for Christina! and she sends her word she *must* come and rest in the Vicar's Walk as soon as she can leave the house. She is to have a low easy bench sent down to our end of it especially for Chrissy's use. Cousin Bird, you have brought a blessing with you. My heart seems full of hope once more. Tell me, what have *you* done?"

"All is in good train, dear! Mrs. Loraine will write, so will I; but we must guard against impatience on Christina's part. She may still be some few weary months without her husband. We must preach *patience* and *trust* to her, and pray for God's blessing on our earnest hopes."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DRIVE TO LYNN.

> And this our life, exempt from public haunts,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
>
> SHAKESPEARE (*As You Like It*, ii. 1).

"By which road shall you drive in to Lynn to-day, Sibyl? Mamma is going to stay at home to write that tiresome woman's letter to Trinidad."

"By the back road, Grace, of course."

"Why of course?"

"You know mamma does not wish us to drive past the barracks, or rather the guard-room, when we drive to Lynn without her."

"As if being stared at did one any harm!"

said the fair-seeming Grace, who had the art of looking down and cuddling herself all over into dimples when enjoying the admiration of mankind, and so got the credit of being "such an innocent little thing."

We honestly own to having a horror of such fair-seeming girls as Grace Loraine, who can take in turns the airs of modesty or insolence, languor or liveliness at pleasure from their stores of affection. We could never see that soft *odalisque*-like Grace without thinking that *when* that *something* on her upper lip became confirmed, and her rosy pulp hardened, and her sleepy eyes acquired the authority of middle age, she would become not only a coarse and ungraceful, but even a repulsive woman.

How she could have been Mrs. Loraine's daughter, and even half-sister to Sibyl, we never ceased to wonder.

"I think I know why you wish to go the

front road to Lynn, Grace. It is to get rid of those odious French books Jane Tweedy lent you. I will go *round* to the library with you with pleasure."

"Suppose I have got no odious French books to return, dear! and do not intend going with you to Lynn."

"Then you have English novels quite as unfit for your reading. I saw 'Dare All' on your sofa to-day, while mamma was talking to you of 'My Novel,' and really thought you were reading it. Oh Grace, how can you be so base? mamma trusts us so fully!"

"Keep your indignation for your own sins, and your friend Miss Burleigh's," Grace retorted angrily. "You will get none of my novels to amuse yourself with on the back road by your pretty ruse."

"As if I would read them, Grace! Nonsense! Give them to me to return, or come with me yourself."

"There comes the carriage! Mamma's *darling obedient treasure* had better make haste! You are a *humbug*, Sibyl," the gentle, innocent Grace added, as Sibyl went into her own room sorrowfully enough. "I hate her," Grace said to herself; "she will never help me to anything I want, though mamma would never suspect her. How I shall get that third volume of 'Queans of Paris' I don't know, unless clever Jane Tweedy will bring it to church for me in the soft leather Bible-case."

Graceless Grace Loraine! As a child, greedy and sly, in spite of lavish kindness and encouragement; as a girl, treacherous and corrupt, in an atmosphere of truth and honour! Heaven help those in your power as a woman, and give you no dearer ties than those you have already outraged!

* * * * *

It was Davies's opinion—and Davies was an authority on such matters—that there "wasn't a pair of horses, nor yet a carriage, search the county round, as could hold a candle to his blood bays and his barouche at The Beeches."

"You may mostly tell widder ladies' carriages by their lumbering weight, and the steam on their closed windows," he declared, and we found, comically enough, many that answered his pithy description. "But my missis," he added condescendingly, "don't meddle with what she don't understand, and you see the result in them bays, and that there barouche!"

Mrs. Loraine was wise enough to trust the management of her stables to her brother-in-law, Colonel Loraine; the happiness of whose life consisted in bringing a military discipline and his own severe taste, not to say despotism, to bear on the *cellars* and *stables* of his less

experienced friends. In the Colonel's absence Davies plumed himself on being supreme in the stable-yard at The Beeches. When the Colonel came down Davies was the meekest of his employés.

Into Davies's dark-green barouche Sibyl nestled herself, contrasting as well with its lighter lining as an opening rosebud with its leaves, and was soon rolling lightly towards the lodge-gates on her way to Lynn.

Mrs. Loraine watched the carriage along the winding approach, now almost lost in the deep shade of the noble clumps of trees which gave their name and fame to her park, now flashing out again into the sunshine, and scattering the pheasants who were leisurely feasting on the mast which the beeches now shed with every breeze that blew.

There was a peep of the carriage again as it passed slowly out of the grand iron gates to the high-road; and from thence

Sibyl never failed to send a kiss homewards. Mother and daughter clung to such fond and foolish little habits of Sibyl's childhood, and had a hundred little innocent ways of increasing their stores of love and confidence.

Mrs. Loraine's iron gates were as unrivalled as her step-daughter, and deserve notice as we are passing through them. The story was, that they had been brought over from some grand French château, belonging to an ancestor of the Loraines. Probably they had been copied from a French design, at least. They were stately, towering, highly ornate, with the family initials cunningly interwoven on each of them. They rolled to and fro, in iron grooves of their own, needing all the lodge-keeper's strength to set them in motion; and when they closed, it was with a clang that could be heard far and near, and struck terror into the hearts of any juvenile passers-by.

It would be difficult to find lovelier peeps of more peaceful park-lands in all England than round about Rippleford on the way to Lynn or Dullford; or beyond the old common of Shepley to Vernon's Chase, the show-place of that side of Rootshire.

And whether you passed between the well-banked woods, all tufted with graceful ferns, or looked far away over the stretches of rich red loam or blue-green swedes, or watched the lazy cattle grouped in shady corners of the rich pastures, or the game feeding so unsuspectingly in the green wood rides that would soon re-echo with a murderous *feu de joie*, you could not but feel how bounteously nature had dealt with the landowners of Rootshire thereabouts.

There were "bits" in and round the village well known to artists and botanists, and others, that the quietly-disposed neighbours could never keep free from merry-making

urchins, and screaming petticoated mites of mischief. The ford was one of these; there the barefooted imps, with their ragged little trousers rolled up to their knees, had a decided advantage over their elders and betters; for on whichever side of the Ripple the argument began, the lovers of order and quiet were speedily routed and probably well splashed into the bargain.

The stepping-stones, with the sparkling eddies round them, had a fascination for ourselves long past the time when it was thought pretty for us to pull off our shoes and stockings and wade through the laughing Ripple itself.

The village of Rippleford was so scattered, it was difficult to define it. Here it was snugly sheltered under Lady Vansittart's roadside oaks; there it had arranged itself in a row, or single file, as if on the march to Dullford. Here, again, it had stopped on a

pretty green, and spread itself round a brilliant foreground of old-fashioned flowers, and was half-smothered in clematis and Virginian creeper; while, further on, some poor straggling homesteads were propping themselves up in an old orchard, and were pretty nearly as mossy, and twisted, and tumble-down as the old apple-trees themselves.

Rippleford Church was mercifully hidden among its old yew-trees, and overgrown with ivy. Otherwise it was in itself as bewildering a specimen of British bad taste, demonstrated in bricks and mortar, as the United Kingdom could produce.

But such as it was, above all now that Nature had so tenderly veiled the deformities of Art, it was the delight of its good Vicar's heart; and it was kept so free from speck or blemish, and dressed forth so gaily for all Church festivals that the blood sometimes ran cold in the veins of Mr. Traill's Low

Church parishioners as they groaned, "What next! what next!"

The churchyard had an indescribable stillness and peace in it that seemed little short of miraculous in such a populous village. The solemn yew-trees and crumbling tombstones overhung the wayward Ripple as it danced and sang on its way to the sunny southern bank of Mrs. Vernon's lawn; they formed an allegory of careless life and peaceful death to those who cared to read the lesson Nature spread before them.

Strangers passing a few days in the village, even brides and bridegrooms spending a short honeymoon at its dainty little inn, never failed to feel the charm of that tranquil spot; and many wished that when their turn came, they might be laid to rest in such a peaceful home.

But we must linger no longer among the much-loved nooks of Rippleford. We should

be half way to Lynn, listening with Sibyl Loraine to the outpouring of the gatekeeper's heart at the "pike" — "Mrs. Bunney's hutch," as it was called, owing to the numerous offspring that had fallen to that poor little woman's share.

Mrs. Blight considered Mrs. Bunney to be "wanting in common decency! *Three—living —at once!* And to christen them as she did! It was wrong and quite discreditable of Mr. Traill to encourage such a creature! And as for recommending her to claim the Queen's bounty—she would like to know if the Queen approved of Jewish names for Christian children?"

The obnoxious little Bunneys had been baptized, by command of a crotchety godfather, as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego.

"They're a born into a fiery furnace o' trouble, they be; let's hope they may come out on it as well as they three faithful

servants o' the Lord," Farmer Loam had said solemnly.

In vain Mr. Traill had set before the old Biblicist that it was in no way well to run the risk of bringing ridicule upon the babies as well as upon those time-honoured and heroic Jews!

Farmer Loam had waxed almost as irate as Nebuchadnezzar himself "in *his* rage and fury," and had threatened to withdraw any help that it might have been in his heart to give the widow Bunney and her orphans, and had had his way of course.

"One Bible name be as good as another," quoth he to Mr. Traill. "You bean't ashamed o' yourn, sir, be ye? There ain't no commandment about picking and choosing, as *I* knows on. If I'd a chosen *Judas* now ye might a had some reason to complain; but I've a chosen names to show the power and glory o' God to all as trust in Him.

Names with a meaning as has worn well, and will wear yet many a troubled year to come."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego now stood unsteadily holding on by the board in the "pike" door, behind which Mrs. Bunney dammed her family flood. The poor woman had a struggle to release herself from the six little fists that clung to her as she made her way over it, to take her legal shilling at the carriage-door, blushing and overjoyed to find half-a-crown and a pound of tea with it in Sibyl's gracious hands.

"Mamma wants to know how you all are, Mrs. Bunney? and where Jem is? We have some weeding for him if he is not employed elsewhere."

"Bless your mamma, and you, too, miss! Jem's doing finely, miss. Sir 'Gustus Vansittart have took him to mend his backbone, he says, with beef and beer! He 've fed and

clothed him up. You wouldn't know him, Miss Loraine! Jem have got charge of five of Sir 'Gustus's valuablest dogs, and he's to have a pound apiece for 'em if they are safe and well when the Baronite comes back, to put into the savings bank, miss."

"What a trusty boy Jem must be," Sibyl said heartily, to give the mother time to take breath.

"He *be* that, miss. And Sir 'Gustus have pretty nearly *supervented* his crutches with steels and springs. He says he'll make a man o' my boy, my poor little cripple, now, miss; but the babies misses Jem sadly, miss. Poor little dears," she added to the three little men who had gone bodily down together in a struggling, roaring heap behind the board. "They've six double teeth coming through among 'em. Shadrach's is a coming sideways, 'parently. 'Tis dreadful

hard for him, and for me too, miss—there! there! Bless your dear mamma!—there! mammy's a coming. Bless my heart alive! I *can't* take ye all up at once!"

CHAPTER VII.

DELIVER US FROM EVIL.

> Hope humbly then, with trembling pinions soar;
> Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore.
>
> POPE (*Essay on Man*).

LYNN was an active, stirring, but somewhat old-fashioned country town, cast into the shade by an oppressive neighbour, Dullford; but it had a brave heart, and goodly ambitions, and quite a famous pig-market of its own, long before the neglected drainage of Dullford led people to turn up their noses at the pretensions of that place.

Lynn knew it was behind the times, and had roused itself to great exertions before there was any whisper of moving the military

glory of Dullford to new barracks on its breezy hillside.

It had opened a branch from its rival's railroad, and built a nest-like station upon that branch, and placed two tidy flies and a bran-new omnibus there to catch any portion of the great stream of traffic through Rootshire that might trickle into its countrified streets.

But after the barracks were built, and soldiers were to be seen exercising on Lynn's Long Acre, and a band played weekly before the King's Arms, and moustached dandies lounged among Lynn's fluttered townsfolk, a change came over the place, as sudden as any transformation scene in a theatre. Its soul rose above pigs. Beer and skittles lost their charms. Plate-glass windows replaced many a rattling leaden lattice.

The one herring and haddock dealer threw out the entire front of his snug home, and put in white marble and lobsters, where hitherto

his well-fed cat had basked among his wife's scarlet geraniums and emblematic ornamental shells. The butcher, not to be outdone, or thrown in the shade, burst out in an alarming display of brass hooks and gas-jets. And the confectioner at once suppressed his store of "kisses" and "hardbake" and set forth to his admiring neighbours a ghastly bride-cake, upon which Cupid and Hymen appeared in sugar regimentals, kneeling in trembling joy, on wires, beside a sugar drum.

Having a quarry of good stone at hand, Lynn next bethought itself of building a theatre, to the mayor of Dullford's extreme mortification, for his poor little neighbour's success seemed to be assured by such reckless projects. The rector of Lynn pleaded earnestly for another church ; but the builders got the better of the clergy, and the theatre was more than half way up before even the site of the church was chosen.

The theatre, in fact, was so far advanced as to give its name to the back-road by which Sibyl Loraine was passing into the town. It was a quiet road usually, but now, encumbered by heaps of stone and rubbish, and all the earth dug out of the theatre's foundations, it had come to be nearly disused.

Davies drove slowly and carefully past the pits and puddles, bricks and rubbish; it was altogether against the grain he drove that way at all, and the pace he chose was one of solemn protest, while in truth he watched with interest the progress of a huge block of stone that was being hoisted to crown the bold-faced building as a base to the royal arms.

"Stop, Davies! Let us see it placed!" Miss Loraine cried eagerly, and, excited by the intense interest of the moment, she stood up in the carriage.

There were men below halloing caution,

men above halloing encouragement, and many idlers silently watching the monster on its way, its almost imperceptible progress through the air.

There was a pause, and then a cry—an unearthly cry—which Sibyl never forgot; then a violent rattling of chains, a heavy *thud* upon the earth, and a cloud of blinding dust, and then—a moment of dead silence.

The monster had fallen to the ground!

All the chains and ropes and pullies, so tried and trusty hitherto, had failed, and there it lay; and as the men started back and apart, Sibyl saw that one had fallen beneath it, never to rise again! She saw his head and outstretched arms.

"Fetch Dr. Floyd!" she gasped to the terror-stricken servants, as she opened the carriage-door herself and sprang out. "Fly for Dr. Floyd!"

In a second more she was among the men.

Some seemed stunned, all were aghast and purposeless, till Sibyl, with all the strength of despair, pushed at the stone and cried for help. "Help! help! Remove the stone, before he dies!"

Then tools were brought, and crowbars, and savage strength was brought to bear upon the block to turn it on its side, and then the man was free.

One of the labourers brought a mat and laid it gently over to hide the ghastly sight from Sibyl's view.

"Mike's choking with his blood!" cried one poor fellow, and, eager to raise the head, he stooped towards the bleeding man, and fainted dead away.

"Oh, let me help!" said Sibyl's tearful voice, and the men made way. "Bring water," she said. "Is there no wife or mother to help him?"

"His wife and childer's in Ireland," a gruff

voice from the crowd answered her. "Mike come from Dublin wi' a gang. They didn't bring no women."

"Fetch me some water! Oh, bring Dr. Floyd! Help me to rest his head on my lap!"

She bathed the face. She tenderly freed the purple mouth from blood and sand. She loosened the shirt to give the fluttering heart relief. But all in vain.

"Can't none on ye say a prayer to ease his soul?" the gruff voice asked, as the man still seemed to breathe. "Mike was a rare one for prayin'! Say a prayer, mum, if ye knows one handy. You can't do no more for him; but maybe his *soul's alive* though his poor body's crushed to *nought*."

And Sibyl steadied her voice, and leant over Mike, repeating the only prayer that came to mind.

"That's the right one for us all," the gruff

man said, meaning to thank her for her effort. "His will *is* done on earth, and delivered from evil our poor mate *is*. He's gone! 'Twill fall heavy on his poor Mary that he died here all alone with ne'er a whole bone in his poor, hardworking body," Mike's mate added, with tears on his dusty cheeks, where tears had not been seen for many and many a year.

The man had told the truth. Mike was safe from earthly pain and care. He was delivered from evil. That long, long, quivering sigh had carried his soul into the Infinite. The silent, motionless dead remained in Sibyl's arms.

She was brought thus suddenly and unprepared into the presence of the King of Terrors, face to face with the most terrible reality of life.

At that moment she had utterly forgotten herself, in wondrous pity, in mute reverence for the dead lying in such ghastly loneliness

in the midst of that living crowd. At that moment the poor unknown labourer lying at her feet was almost as a brother to Sibyl Loraine. She yearned over him and the "Mary and little childer," unconscious of their heavy loss.

The men had taken the body from her lap, and made a rough couch for it of their coats, and laid it gently down. And now Sibyl Loraine, with an instinct she was hardly conscious of, knelt down beside it, and gently closed the glazing eyes, and putting back the matted hair from the sunburnt brow, she bent and kissed it.

"Let me know his wife's name," she whispered to the man, whose voice and tears had given her courage to address him. "I will write and tell her gently."

"God bless you! you shall have it. John Sullivan shall bring it to you—he's his cousin; but we can't find him, leastways

not now. 'Twill pretty nigh break *his* heart."

"Send him to me," she urged, giving her address, "or come yourself. Tell him we are Irish," she said, to lessen the distance between herself and the unknown mourner.

"Tender an' true ye are, God bless ye!" a voice cried from the crowd, as Sibyl made her way hurriedly to the carriage in which Dr. Floyd, Colonel Meredith, and others had just arrived. And as they all closed about poor Mike, poor Sibyl sank back in it trembling. Now that all need for exertion was over reaction set in. Her shuddering, and short, almost inaudible sobs, alone told what the strain had been.

"Cover Miss Loraine with these rugs, Ellis," Davies said with nervous asperity. "Better she be wrapped in a horse-cloth than look at them stains, and shiver like that."

Ellis was an old and old-fashioned retainer, loving his young lady as the apple of his eye. So now he got into the carriage and covered his young mistress with all the care of a woman.

"Thanks, Ellis," she murmured. "Get me a glass of water somewhere, and take me home."

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR DAYS AND DAYS—FOR EVER.

"Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me."—PSALM lv. 5.

OF course Mrs. Blight heard quickly of the Lynn tragedy, and went off at once to her friend Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy, to give a version of it, by which every item of truth became a spiteful falsehood.

"Of all Miss Loraine's doings I do call that the wildest and the wickedest," she averred. "To go out of her way to see a man that was crushed to death! and to rush into the very thick of the crowd to touch him, as they

say she did. Some one said she kissed him. But I can't *quite* believe that, unless she was hysterical. People don't mind whom they clutch at then. It was bad enough to take pleasure in going to see a man weltering in his blood. All alone, too. She hadn't even a gentleman with her. What will she come to?"

Mrs. MacBeggah did her best to answer this query by raking up some hard texts to fling at a shameless sister, and by splitting them up she made them sharp and one-sided enough to suit her purpose admirably. And then the two ladies had early tea, and thoroughly enjoyed the vision they called up of Miss Loraine's wretchedness to come.

They neither of them knew that at moments of great pain and peril and misery, all the worldly barriers between rich and poor, man and woman, sinners and saints, are thrown down: feuds as well as chance

distinctions are all forgotten. In pain and peril we are heartily glad of every loving word, and heartily return any loving hand-clasp.

When in imminent danger we cling together in true and honest humility, as the chastened children of God. We do not ask if the devoted crew of the lifeboat that is braving the storm to rescue us are men of family. Or if the heroic firemen who risk their lives to save our darlings from the burning ruins are "people one would like to know." At such moments our affectations leave us. Our masks fall off. We are *true,* then, to the purest and best promptings of our hearts.

It would seem, indeed, as if we must stand on a Mount Calvary of our own, and be overshadowed by the infinite terror of our own cross before we can be *true Christians.*

We think the one hardened, impenitent

thief would surely have remained the solitary exception, even if all mankind had been crucified with him.

Neither Mrs. Blight nor Mrs. Tweedy had ever had any experience of such emotions as overwhelmed Miss Loraine during those cruel moments of Mike Sullivan's agony after the accident at Lynn. We do not blame them for their ignorance, but we do blame them, as loudly professing Christians, for forgetting how many, and how solemn too, are the texts charging erring humanity to bridle its tongue and to forbear from judgment.

Meantime, Sibyl Loraine strove in vain to shut out from her mind the piteous fellow-creature she had held in her arms, dying and dead; and the piteous grief of Mary and the children, to whom she had sent the evil tidings through their parish priest.

She had started on that drive to Lynn full of

the joy of a self-approving innocent existence, and suddenly she felt how paltry she was, how powerless to cope with that unseen strength. She felt as humble, and as much afraid as Eve is described to have been in gaining the knowledge of good and evil. And her soul was, as it were, naked before her, trembling with pain and shame. All her joyous carelessness was gone. All her hitherto sweet fancies and maiden meditations gave place to a brooding trouble; and an awful longing to know *whither* death had carried his prey, and *what* had escaped from the crushing torture. She had seen how, in a moment, the shadow of life was replaced by the great *reality*, death, and she searched her heart eagerly for its belief in the immortality of her trembling soul.

She turned back, in vain, to try to find any infantine remembrance of her father; she almost regretted she had never loved very

dearly any one who had died; lest that terrible object alone should meet her on the threshold of the unknown world. She was but an inexperienced, timid girl after all; and was fighting with a crowd of terrible fancies, little knowing that time would efface most of them as surely as dawn follows night.

She was no coward usually; but her nerve had been rudely strained, and was still all unstrung; and there remained on her lips for days and days an indescribable sensation of chill; and she had a dread of darkness, and a feeling, too, that these were but symbols of the inevitable night which each bright day brought nearer to her.

Mrs. Loraine found that her watchful tenderness was uncared for, hardly noticed in fact, by her darling. Sibyl was pale, and sad, and silent, or when she spoke, it was to blame herself for her butterfly life, and to wish that

she could be of use to some one, join some nursing sisterhood, follow in Florence Nightingale's footsteps, however humbly and far off. And Mrs. Loraine became alarmed, and felt lost without her usual outspoken and hopeful confidant.

She determined to consult her dear friend and near neighbour Mrs. Burleigh, though to seek a substitute for Sibyl, to talk of Sibyl, seemed like treachery, and depressed her sadly.

Again and again she had nearly told Sibyl that she must get sympathy if not advice elsewhere. She refrained with superhuman efforts, and went her way without speaking to Sibyl on foot to Pendrills. To order out Davies and the carriage on such an errand seemed to give it publicity; so she went on foot, and alone; for Grace had said, "What could it signify if Sibyl *had* had a good fright and was ill? Other people had to get over it. Her trouble was

not so crushing as Mike Sullivan's. Don't worry, mamma!"

Finding Mrs. Loraine was not to be cheered by her indifferent philosophy, Grace tried no better exhibition of feeling, perhaps had not any to exhibit. At any rate, she settled herself most comfortably in Mrs. Loraine's chair by the fire as soon as the sweet, anxious mother left the room, and read her sensational novels without interruption until her return.

Only once before in all her life in Rippleford—that is, in eighteen years—had Mrs. Loraine been driven from the sweet sanctuary of her own home to seek advice. Then, too, she had gone afoot, and alone—lest the shame of the wretched kitchen wench, for whom she sought a safe shelter, should be spread by neighbours themselves no better perhaps than the fallen girl she desired to give another fair chance to.

"What ought I to do for my darling?" she asked Mrs. Burleigh, after telling the story of the sad accident and its effect upon Sibyl.

Mrs. Burleigh was full of sympathy in every word and look, and held her friend's hand with one of those grasps that do away with any necessity for friendly professions.

"She tells me she is sick of her butterfly life. She wishes to go into training as a nurse, and to be a sister of charity, without joining any professing set of women. 'To follow Florence Nightingale, however humbly,' was the way she put it. What ought I to do?"

"It is a very natural, a very noble wish. Stirred as Sibyl's tender nature has been, all that is finest and most generous in it now prompts her to sacrifice herself for others, and to lessen suffering in every form.

"You would not surely have me consent?" Mrs. Loraine interrupted in nervous alarm. "Oh! how different to the fate her father

would have wished! and I have dreamed of for her, as a happy wife and mother! What *shall* I do to prevent her own plan?"

"Take time," Mrs. Burleigh said in a courageous, decided tone, that was as good as sal-volatile to Mrs. Loraine. "Tell her you can do nothing rashly for her. Get her to tell you all that is passing in her mind. Promise her wishes careful consideration if, after the first shock and the first impulse dies away, she should calmly adhere to them. Such training as she proposes by no means unfits a woman for the duties of married life. It would be a blessing, I think, if more young ladies got tired of butterfly life and devoted themselves to some useful purpose. Sibyl will ennoble *any* work she devotes herself to. But you may remind her how much she may do for those about her, within present reach. Show her that it is by no means always an easy thing to be a great and *good* woman in that state of

life into which it has pleased God to call her. Try and keep her self-sacrificing ambition within call; it is so apt to go drifting to the moon," Mrs. Burleigh said, smiling, as she saw the lines of pain and perplexity smoothing out of the fair face before her. "I believe, dearest Mrs. Loraine, Sibyl will listen to reason. I cannot fancy any heroics ever taking her from *you*. Try change of air and scene, first of all, to remove her from the painful impressions crowding upon her here. Why not take the girls for a long visit to your dear old uncle, Dean Ponsonby? Greyminster is not a gay town, but it holds many new interests, and *masses* of thought, that will awaken Sibyl's mind to new exertion, and put fresh vigour into her character."

"We paid him such a long visit two years ago," Mrs. Loraine said, hesitating; "yet I believe he would do anything in the world for Sibyl."

"I should think so, indeed! He will be overjoyed to have you!"

"But you forget the minor canon! If the Dean was alone I should not hesitate. But Henry Elliot lives with him now."

"I should not fear Henry Elliot. Besides, is he not engaged to the bishop's *daughters?* Mrs. Blight certainly spread a halo of romance over him with some such report."

"There was something not quite straightforward, I believe. He was engaged to one, and tried to make love to the other, or something like it,—and the bishop sent his daughters abroad. They are dear good girls. I shall be sorry if Sibyl does not see them."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Burleigh with decision, "let the girls know all about it, and I should not fear either of them will fall a prey to the fascinating Henry Elliot! Do propose your visit to the Dean at once. But how I am laying down the law! I, who

never ask or take advice, except from Douglas!"

"How glad I am I came to you!" said Mrs. Loraine. "You have done me so much good."

"Well, now we may have tea, and then Madge and I will walk home with you. It will do Sibyl good to see another butterfly as happy as mine is. But as for Sibyl's plan, if the worst came to the worst, you would be ill, my dear neighbour! and do you believe she would leave you then? Depend upon it, the sweet sister of charity would be found as she is generally now, the creature nearest to your heart."

CHAPTER IX.

THE REVEREND MATTHEW TRAILL.

"Rich was his soul, though his attire was poor."
DRYDEN (*Character of a Good Parson*).

"Allur'd to brighter worlds, and led the way."
GOLDSMITH (*Deserted Village*).

GOOD Mr. Traill, the Vicar of Rippleford, was a man of few words; and being an abstruse scholar, naturally had few ideas that he could communicate to the generality of his female parishioners,—and fate had perversely placed him in a parish crowded with women, widows with many marriageable daughters.

Mr Traill was nervous, or perhaps we should say irritable, in the company of ladies. They disturbed the current of his thoughts, without yielding him any compensating pleasure during the disturbance.

"Afraid of his own shadow," Mrs. Blight said of him; while those who knew Mr. Traill better declared he had a fine turn for dry humour, and that he found food for his taste in being by turns patronised by Mrs. Blight as a shy recluse, and then maligned by her friend Mrs. Tweedy for his love of low society; for he attended all harvest homes, cricket matches, and club feasts, with a hearty desire to add to the innocent enjoyments of the people, not only to keep those enjoyments within sober bounds.

But to both these censorious ladies his love of his old pupil, Sir Augustus Vansittart, and his habit of dining at The Manor when anything was going on there, proved what a

"sad, sad worldling and worshipper of mammon the man was!"

If Mr. Traill had a besetting sin, it was indolence; a slothful desire not to be troubled with trifles, especially trifles relating to his own affairs, which led surely, and swiftly too, to the undoing of those to whom he intrusted those affairs.

He believed himself to be cultivating a Spartan contempt for the luxuries of life, a soul above the male Marthas, for there are many such, of creation. While simply and truly he was too indolent to make his servants do their duty by him, and had a sickening dread of his cook's scowls and his gardener's cunning and obstinacy.

Mr. Traill believed he could endure martyrdom for great principles. He could die, if need were, like Sir Thomas More, or Dr. John Forest; but he could not stop the cold joints being taken bodily away by Mrs.

Thorn's friends in the village; nor ask the cantankerous Bellworthy to give him back the key of the beer-cellar, of which he was making such a disreputable use.

No! Mr. Traill could not encounter Mrs. Thorn's scowls, nor the bitterness of Bellworthy when admonished. Most of the most painful, because pitiful, duties of daily life Mr. Traill lumped together under the unfair heading of "fuss," and shirked them, as we believe he would not the pains of a worthier martyrdom.

The Vicarage told tales of its master. It was the house of the sluggard. He could hardly get out or in for the trailing roses, and unpruned pears, that were the glory of the dwelling in Mr. Carey's time. Many a small rent might be seen on the Vicar's back and breast, caused by the branches that had clung to him in vain, to remonstrate as he passed among them.

The paths in his garden were closing up from the encroachments of straggling lilacs, and overgrown guelder roses, whose few blossoms were cast over the wall to complain to passers-by of their master's neglect and the rank, dank soil within.

When Mr. Traill noticed the neglected state of his own possessions, he said nothing, but quietly took his way through Mrs. Loraine's well-kept gardens to the unrivalled larch-walk. There he drew in all the scent of their tasselled foliage, all the fresh and soothing influence of the "buds and bird voices" round him, and spun the thread of his next Sunday's discourse, in charity with all men, Bellworthy forgetting.

The indoor arrangements at the Vicarage were in keeping with its garden, and a discredit to the good man who suffered them.

Mrs. Thorn allowed no rival near her. She preferred the companionship and uncertain

help of guileless maidens and raw youths who dared not interfere with her. This being the case, the village aspirants for service with gentlefolks got "took in at Traill's," as they expressed it, first of all, to practise on the Vicar's crockery and patience.

At his first words of reproof, after long suffering, which always allowed them time to gain a character, they would complain loudly of their hardships in his service, and so depart.

After a decent time allowed for the burial of all bitter memories, the cunning young ones would appear at the good Vicar's study window, smiling, and in their Sunday best, to ask him to recommend them. And full of faith in the goodness of Providence, he would do so ; and so started many a rolling stone on a new and smashing career.

At the time of which we write, Mrs. Tweedy had fairly, or unfairly rather, bullied

the Vicar into taking the chief scholar of her own pet Sunday class into his service as parlourmaid, for which place she was about as well fitted as for that of maid of honour to her Majesty.

Betsy's sole ambition was to secure a beau to tramp upon the highways with on Sunday, to "keep company" as they say in Rootshire. But, as yet, Betsy carried her pinks and her southernwood with flushing cheeks past the lounging Adonises of the Church Lane "without so much as ever a how-dy'e-do from them stoopids."

Betsy was hopelessly fat, with shoulders near her ears, and no sign of any waist to her body as yet, and this may have had something to do with her disappointment, for certainly many worse girls than Betsy otherwise had succeeded in gaining the admiration of the Rootshire youth, and shared their time and flowers almost too lavishly with

"them stoopids," if only half that Mrs. Blight said was true.

Betsy had her good points; she thought "ever so much more of master," she did, "than of that there old cat, Mother Tweedy." And this semi-reverence, and her unruffled temper under Mrs. Thorn's "haggravatin," made her less obnoxious to her master than many a more efficient maid might have been. On the whole, Mr. Traill preferred a blundering girl to a blundering boy to wait on him; the latter blew so hard at the slightest exertion.

Mr. Traill was just now, therefore, in comparative clover. Betsy thought ever so much of him, and Mrs. Thorn and Bellworthy having "fallen out," and being sadly afraid of one another's power of revelation, his Reverence had better dinners, and his garden was being "tidied up a bit."

He fondly hoped his long-suffering for-

bearance was to be rewarded, that things were coming right of themselves. He was of good heart, enjoying the superb autumn immensely, though he missed Sir Augustus Vansittart's society sadly, and longed for the tramp on the heathery moors his friend urged his coming to Glenducie for.

"It is not to be thought of," Mr. Traill told himself firmly, after a careful perusal of his pass-book from the Lynn and Rootshire Bank.

"I declare I thought my balance must be three times what I see it is; and every penny of this quarter's money is as bad as spent! Goodness knows how long poor Bates must remain in bed; and if I don't pay for his substitute in the school he must resign—and starve. I declare, too, I haven't a coat, or hat, nor yet boots to appear in among strangers. This has been such an

autumn. Claims of all kinds falling as thick as Lady Vansittart's acorns; and Vansittart's absence makes such a difference. But he has troubles enough, poor fellow, without my writing him begging letters. While I have a guinea left in my own breeches-pocket I will not prey upon him—my own boy, as it were.

> "True priests, he said, and preachers of the word,
> Were only stewards of their sovereign Lord;
> Nothing was theirs; but all the public store."

Such was the Vicar's soliloquy, as he watched the blackbirds taking their afternoon meal upon his lawn, varying their desperate tussles with the vigorous worms by hop, hop, hopping round, admiring nature, with their heads on one side not to miss a sound that should lead them straight to a fresh struggle with their writhing victims. "Very hard upon the worms," he thought; and to drive out the thought of the many injustices and evils he could not prevent, he

took his way to give the sick schoolmaster, Bates, an hour's confab and sympathy.

And as he went his way, many a designing woman with a sick child in her arms, or a bad leg, or an idle husband, put herself in his way, and got the better of the Vicar's prudence, in face of that study of his pass-book—justifying all Mrs. Blight had said.

"Poor things! poor things! What are my troubles compared to theirs," he would ask himself, "with no wife or children or varicose veins to torment me?"

> "Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride,
> And e'en his failings lean'd to virtue's side."

CHAPTER X.

OH WOMAN! WOMAN!

"Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in anywise to do evil."—PSALM xxxvii. 8.

IT turned out a stormy afternoon, and the Vicar having heard of a case of urgent distress a mile or two beyond Bates's present lodging, had had a long walk in the rain before he got home to enjoy one of the Glenducie grouse and a glass of Bellworthy's beer. He owned to himself he was fairly fagged, and needed rest after a sad scene with a dying parishioner.

After dinner therefore, instead of changing all his clothes, as a rational man would who

has been well damped, and now steams as he sits by the fire, he took down an ancient friend from his bookshelves, and settled himself to his beloved Greek.

"Master's a knocking nails into his coffin as hard as ever he can knock!" Mrs. Thorn said angrily, bursting into a homely but alarming parabole to Betsy. As she passed down from her attic retirement, with all the polish and fragrance of yellow soap fresh upon her, she had looked in upon the study fire, and had given a word of honest advice to the reckless man as he sat there steaming.

"Lor'! whatever do he do that for! I left him as comfortable as could be, with one of they square books as looks so heavy, and be so light, a mumbling to himself, upon his knee. I didn't see no coffin! You makes my very flesh for to creep, Mrs. Thorn!"

"Stupid!" cook said grimly. "'Tis easy to

make your flesh creep. Your heart's about the size of a hazel-nut. Did you never hear *that* saying before? There, run! there's the door-bell!"

"A letter from Mrs. Blight, *Miss* Betsy Giles," said a sarcastic, ill-looking boy in buttons, who was the terror of all the cats and dogs in Rippleford—another pet by-the-bye of Mrs. Tweedy's; "and if she don't get an answer pretty sharp, she'll call for it herself. So tell your guv'nor to mind his eye."

Betsy shut the door in the ill-looking boy's face with dignity; but on returning to give an answering message from her master she found Ned Spong standing on his head with his feet against the door-post, and her indignation got the better of her.

"Get down, do! Oh, you haggravatin' himp! You've broke the paint! I'll tell master!—see if I don't! Master won't write

till he pleases. You be off! That's the answer."

"'Tain't," said Ned.

"'Tis," said Betsy.

"Who got all them verses to learn for sniggering at Mother Tweedy's face when it was all o' one side like a blighted apple with the toothache?" asked the ill-favoured Ned jeeringly.

"Who got two great whacks across his back the next Sunday as ever was, for letting they marbles go drop, drop, drop down the gallery-stairs?" Betsy was wild enough to retort.

"Fie, children, fie!" said the good Vicar, opening the study-door to reprimand the loiterers without having heard the discordance of their duet; "wasting your employers' time like that while you chatter on the door-step! If Ned Spong is a friend of yours, Betsy, ask him in to tea some Sunday to talk over school-days."

"Friend!" Betsy said in anguish to Mrs. Thorn, when she complained of her master's cruel mistake; "if I don't find a better friend than Ned Spong, I shouldn't care how soon I dies an old maid!"

We believe—but our wisdom came later with sad experience—that most of Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy's pet Sunday-class scholars were no better than Betsy Giles and Ned Spong.

They were little whited sepulchres. Much goodness *might* be buried in their hearts. Let us hope with the good Vicar that it was; but, honestly, their hearts were so deep *we* never found any.

"My dear Sir," Mrs. Blight's letter ran:

"After your unhappy difference with my friend Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy regarding the religious darkness of your parish, and the way you have really *christened*

Mrs. Bunney's three children with their horrible *Jewish* names, she feels it impossible to address you herself; so I consider it my duty to let you know how the members of your Lying-in Club are going on with Lady Vansittart's flannel in her absence.

"As long as you will allow for three breadths and a tuck for shrinking and a hem, all the worthless and designing women scrimp the petticoats, and sell the remainder, which is enough for two.

"We know your Mrs. Gore has done this, for when we taxed her with it, she said if she had scrimped any way it was for her baby; but when we desired her to show us if the baby had it on, she refused to let us touch the cradle while it slept.

"She has refused to come for Mrs. Tweedy's tea-leaves, as others gladly do, thanking God for all His mercies.

"When we told her we would get the

allowance of milk she has from Sir Augustus Vansittart's model farm stopped, if she spoke as she did to us, she said she could not come to and fro three miles for the tea-leaves, because her little ones drag her down upon the road. She put her apron over her face and cried with rage.

"We ask you if that woman 'shall perish in iniquity?'

"'Shall not the wicked be snared in the work of her hands?'

"'We will provoke to anger the hearts of many against her!'

"'Shame shall cover her!'

"What we ask of you now is to withhold your ill-deserved bounties till we are satisfied with this woman's humility and repentance.

"Yours very truly,

"MARTHA ELIZA BLIGHT."

"Oh woman! woman!" groaned the

Vicar, as he came to the well-known signature of this letter. It was by no means the worst specimen of Mrs. Blight's compositions he possessed. She had written it off, as she would say, in haste, *out of her heart.* The subject was clearer, the perverted texts fewer than usual.

"'Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in anywise to do evil.' How many precious and moving admonitions do you overlook in seeking denunciations for your poorer, more tempted sisters! But I will not use *woman* as a term of reproach. I must not be so stirred to anger myself by such foolish doings. I must not let my daily bread be embittered by Mrs. Blight's fermentations. 'Dragged down by little ones upon the road.' My poor friend, my poor Mrs. Gore! you have described yourself only too truly. And could those mothers not feel for you? Never mind! while I have bread

my people shall not *want*. While I have warmth they shall not *perish!* 'Dragged down by little ones upon the road,'" he repeated again, much moved by the simple truth and fulness of Mrs. Gore's plaint;

> "Yet of my little, I have some to spare,
> To feed the famished, and to clothe the bare."

CHAPTER XI.

ONE OF THE GANG.

"A breast that needed not ideal woe."

BYRON (*Lara*).

"A WILD-LOOKING man, calling himself John Sullivan, wants to speak to you, Miss Loraine. But I would not advise you to have anything to do with him, miss. He has been hanging about the back-yard, gardener says, for more than an hour, swearing "he'll get speech of you," as he says, "*alone*." But gardener and me will make him clear out if you please to say he must go," Ellis had, most unwillingly, to inform his young mistress during Mrs. Loraine's absence at Pendrills.

Ellis's authority in the back premises was seldom, if ever, questioned, and if John Sullivan had not been half a head taller than himself, and of a brawny and gigantic presence, he would have liked to have given him something more decided than scornful looks and short words—an unmistakable *shove*, for instance—in return for the stolid persistency of his demand to speak alone with Miss Loraine.

Ellis knew, however, that his strength lay not only in his magnificent calves, but in the unrivalled courtesy of his demeanour, and steadiness of his habits. Neither of these three great gifts would avail him against John Sullivan's bone and muscle. He felt he might as well try to *shove* the rock of Gibraltar—better, indeed, as that would certainly not shove back, and John Sullivan's under jaw said "Beware," and looked like retaliation, if ever a jaw spoke!

"It's all right, Ellis. I expected him. Ask him in."

"I wouldn't, indeed, miss," Ellis felt bound to advise. "He looks for all the world as if he had come out of a pig-sty. His legs are bound with straw-bands; his clothes are mucked with mortar; not the kind of *individual*—excuse me, Miss Loraine—to ask in. Your mamma is so particular."

"Very well then, I'll go out to him," Sibyl answered, and out she went, before Ellis could close the drawing-room door and follow to hear the greeting.

Ellis was still further aggrieved very soon after, by being asked to bring some cold meat and beer for the man so mucked with mortar. But as Miss Loraine herself asked for them, and held her hands outstretched for them, Ellis could not refuse the service required of him for the disreputable-looking stranger.

After this trial of his loyalty Ellis retired, highly displeased, with his hands under his coat-tails, to tell his sorrows to the cook he confided in.

"I would give a sixpence to know what that big brute in the tool-house has got to say to Miss Loraine," he grumbled.

"You never has no patience with your young ladies, Mr. Ellis," cook said cheerily. "You'll hear it all at dinner when Miss Sibyl tells her mamma. And then if you've a mind for anything nice for supper, you must come and tell me," she added, laughing.

"It ain't anything to laugh at," growled the balked retainer in plush.

Miss Loraine shut her *protégé* into the tool-house with the meat and beer, while she ran into the house for her hat and waterproof; and then, accompanied by her strange companion, she went her way out of the back-

yard, and through the dense evergreens of the American garden.

"It's no business of mine," Ellis muttered when the man's cat-skin cap could no longer be seen over the tops of the rhododendrons and kalmias, meandering steadily through the choicest bits of Mrs. Loraine's pleasure-grounds round to the Vicar's Walk; "but it's a pity the Colonel is not here, to stop young ladies from keeping company with *tramps*. That's all I say!"

"You've no call to say such a thing, then, Mr. Ellis," snapped cook, who had not a bad idea, on the whole, of woman's rights, as well as an overweening love for the beautiful daughter of the house. "Miss Sibyl never did *anything* as a lady didn't ought to do yet, nor never will. If you'd take my advice," cook added solemnly, feeling she had lost *her* temper, "you'd take two of your antibilious——"

"Antibilious be——" Ellis began.

Mrs. Loraine's bell and the need for calm prevented Ellis from finishing his sentence. He soon recovered himself, and answered Mrs. Loraine's summons with the stately suavity that made him so great a treasure in that lady's household.

* * * * *

"The door-bell again, Bet-see!" screamed Mrs. Thorn, above the clatter of her cups and saucers and spoons, and the bubbling of her tea-kettle upon the hob. "Depend upon it, *she've come!* I wouldn't be master then, not if I was George Peabody himself then, that I wouldn't."

Mrs. Blight was the bugbear of every household in Rippleford, and to meet her Betsy tied her apron-strings afresh—as in Bible days they girded their loins—and prepared for single combat.

"She ain't agoing to *timidate me,* then," said the brave Betsy.

"But when the *door* was opened the birds began to sing," Betsy said later. "It give me such a turn to see Miss Loraine's pretty face a-smiling at me when I opened it. How pretty real ladies do speak," she continued, softening her own voice to imitate the sweet tones that had greeted her with the inquiry :

"Can I see Mr. Traill, Betsy ? Ask him to spare me a few minutes, will you ?"

"Lor ! who could refuse anythink that was asked 'em like that ? Not master, I be bound ! for I've showed her in. But she's got *such* a man with her !"

"Who is it ? Speak out if you've a mind to be a pleasant fellow-servant. Who is it— the Colonel ?" cook asked, angry at having to get her curiosity gratified by a chit like Betsy Giles.

"Lor, no ! It's a kind of hulking *navvy,*

with a back—he didn't turn his face—a back ever so high, and ever so broad; as broad as yourn pretty near."

"Betsy Giles," said Mrs. Thorn, with injured majesty, "I'll trouble you to let that plate of buttered toast alone till you can keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Well, I *never!*" Betsy said in dismay.

"Hold your tongue, Betsy Giles, before you're sorry for it."

And we grieve to say Betsy did as she was bid. We almost wish this exhibition of unchristian levity had been made before Mrs. Tweedy herself, that she might have split up some texts suitable for such an occasion.

As for Mrs. Thorn, she was, she owned, utterly powerless to cope with this "limb of Satan," and she took refuge, as many very fat women do in moments of impotent fury, in a

copious shower of tears while she finished the buttered toast.

* * * * *

"Miss Loraine! Asking to see me? What ails the woman?" thought the harassed Vicar. "Why could not she write if she had anything to say?"

"Show her into the drawing-room, Betsy. Light the fire there with a few sticks, *dry* sticks; and then fetch me a tidy coat, child, if you can find one."

Betsy again did as she was bid; and by the time Mr. Traill had struggled into a fresh coat and tidy shoes, the drawing-room fireplace was vomiting forth clouds of dense grey smoke, after which the window had to be opened, and the angry smoke went roaring wildly up the chimney, and Mr. Traill and Miss Loraine became visible, bowing and retreating to chairs as far from each other's as they could get.

"How angry he looks," thought Sibyl. "He is red in the face."

The poor Vicar meant only kindness, but smoke was one of the domestic troubles he bore least well. And Betsy had brought him an old dress-coat, tight in the arm-holes too, and he could think of nothing but a village Guy Faux as he first seated himself, he was so nearly suffocated and felt so stiff.

"I came to you because I did not know what to do, Mr. Traill," his sweet visitor said naïvely. "I hope you will help me, and not be angry."

"Tell me all about it, my dear young lady. What can *I* do for *you?*" Mr. Traill asked, recovering all his courtesy.

Then Sibyl answered by telling poor John Sullivan's story. He was cousin to the man crushed to death at Lynn the week before. He had been drinking the morning of the

accident. He had forgotten to fasten or stop some part of the machinery for hoisting the great stones. And when the men slackened to take breath at the crank, it had flown out of their hands, the chains had given out with a run, the block had fallen with deadly force, and poor Mike Sullivan was beneath it.

"I have brought this wretched man, John Sullivan with me," Sibyl said, steadying her voice, which broke sadly in describing that terrible scene in Lynn. "He is wild with remorse; he has written to the widow a most dreadful letter, accusing himself of having murdered her husband. It ought not to go, ought it? Will you hear the man's story, Mr. Traill, and make the misfortune clear to him, and take away the guilt; you will not be hard upon him, will you?" she pleaded, with tears in her eyes. "He cannot do more than earnestly repent! You will comfort him, will you not?" she pleaded again; "and,

above all, you will not let Mrs. Blight or her dreadful friend know what I have told you,—no one knows it but me. They will not believe that any one can be miserably sorry and repent. Even Lady Vansittart disapproves of reformed characters prowling about the neighbourhood; I heard her say so. Among them they would hunt him to death, or into real crime. He has been hiding in the woods all these days."

"Trust him to me," Mr. Traill said gently; "no one can be more anxious than I am to protect the poor and the sorrowful from them all. Trust him to me."

* * * * *

"The Philistines be upon thee," Mr. Traill cried mentally a little later, when having ushered Miss Loraine and her penitent into his study, he saw Mrs. Blight standing on the front doorsteps.

"She said she saw master at the window,

so in she tramped, never so much as a 'if you please' about her," Betsy informed Mrs. Thorn, who was still weeping as she washed up her tea-things. "Lor, now, make it up, do; and come and listen to her a-worritting of master. She's gone into the drawing-room. There's the Tweedy sitting outside in the carriage staring before her as hard as Daniel in the Bible lion's den, and awful he *do* stare! come and listen, do."

"Stop your chatter," Mrs. Thorn whispered, as she rolled her arms in her apron to dry themselves at their leisure, and put her ear to the chink of the cloth door in the passage. Taking care to interpose her high, broad, malignant back between the chink and Betsy. "Master says 'his time's not his own,' she hissed softly to the eager girl. I like that! 'It belongs to a poor soul burdened with an imaginary crime.' Lor! he must be put about afore he'd say that of Miss Loraine."

"You forgets the navvy," hissed Betsy back to her. "But go on listening, do!"

Cook was right, it was under severe pressure of surprise and annoyance the Vicar had blurted out John Sullivan's right to be heard before Mrs. Gore's accuser.

"Oh! how dare she!" panted Mrs. Thorn. "Tell master, indeed, he'd got a visitor there he didn't dare for to let her see! 'Petticoats,' says she; would she have Miss Loraine come out without 'em? Take herself off, will she? Get along with you do, you spiteful, ugly, old magpie!"

* * * * *

Mrs. Blight never forgot that visit to the Vicarage. Long afterwards she brought up her suspicions against the Vicar and the petticoats she had seen reflected in the lower glasses of the study book-shelves.

"The man I did see, and heard him own he was 'one of the gang.' 'A wretch burdened

with a crime,' and that wretch was John Sullivan, the monster Mr. Traill and the Loraines are recommending everywhere to do odd jobs. It is shameful of them. What will Lady Vansittart say of such doings when she returns? She is perfection among the vulgar herd, and does not allow such doings when she is at home. Mark my words, one day or other their eyes will be opened, they will be robbed. That's some comfort."

CHAPTER XII.

HOW FRIENDSHIP GREW

"Ay, these look like the workmanship of heaven,
This is the porcelain clay of human kind."

DRYDEN.

MANY were Mr. Traill's excuses now for visiting the pleasant Loraine family before the ladies took their departure for Greyminster. Dean Ponsonby had responded as Mrs. Burleigh had predicted. He was overjoyed to receive them, and begged them to stay all winter, and as far into the spring as they could bear to remain away from their neighbours and their flowers.

John Sullivan and his future made a very

tough problem for the vicar to solve, and it was not to be solved on the Queen's highway, with chance meetings, and the chance of interruptions from Mrs. Blight or Mrs. Tweedy. So Mr. Traill went by the Vicar's Walk nearly as often as when his friend was at the Manor, and stopped to talk in the sunny verandah quite as often as he went ceremoniously up to the great glass doors, to be let in by the solemn Ellis.

Mrs. Loraine and Sybil felt they themselves had gained a friend, as well as one for Sibyl's gigantic protégé.

Mr. Traill had to break to Miss Loraine the bad news of her penitent's utter unfitness for his old vocation. The man's nerve was gone. He had trembled like an aspen leaf, great drops of anguish stood out upon his brow, and he came near fainting when Mr. Traill went with him to the scene of the tragedy.

"He could no more mount the huge scaffolding ladders, and work upon the narrow planks above now, than he could grasp the bright blue sky, if there. The foreman said, when once a man's heart failed in that wise, he could never again be trusted up the ladders with a load." Mr. Traill reported on their return from Lynn: "He would have taken him on again with pleasure, for he never heard a word against the man; but the scene of the disaster was altogether too much for him. There was no pretence about it," Mr. Traill said with much feeling.

"We should have thought of that, and not tried his courage so cruelly," Sibyl said. "How much suffering we women inflict heedlessly, in our ignorance."

For it was Miss Loraine who had persuaded the Vicar to replace the man among his fellows.

He was an awkward pet, and but grimly

received by the pampered menials at The Beeches. Even his begrudged meals in the tool-house were made more bitter to him by the sounds of the boisterous enjoyment that gladdened the inmates of the servants'-hall close by.

John Sullivan was made to feel that he was a Pariah about The Beeches, and was gradually acquiring a "hang-dog look."

Davies had with difficulty been persuaded to let him sleep in a spare loose-box, and the gardener had gently but firmly refused to let him set foot in his department.

"But he is terrible from his size only," Sibyl assured her friend. "How frankly he answers all we ask him. How anxious he is to do all and more than he is told. He was at work till quite dark last night sifting the cinder-holes for lazy Platt."

"But as we know nothing of the man, we can hardly expect any one to take him in to

lodge until he shows us what he is," the Vicar said cogitatingly. "I will see if Mrs. Gore will take him in for a time; and I dare say I can find work for him for some weeks in my garden. It wants looking to sadly."

Bellworthy had no objection. He was not one of those lazy good-for-nothings, who will neither do their work themselves, nor let any one else do it for them. No; he was willing enough to have the zealous remorse-driven Irishman to do *all* his work; and loudly did Bellworthy praise him for tramping into Dullford one Sunday to see a Catholic priest and take the pledge.

Meantime the Vicar found it very sweet indeed to be caught on his way to and from the schools and his parish visits, and forced to stay and lunch at Mrs. Loraine's. Her Irish blood was never more prettily betrayed than in her hospitable welcomes, and in her gentle way of setting her fidgety guest at his ease.

Out of his own shell, the pulpit, Mr. Traill was apt to be singularly uneasy, and even morose, it had been said; but he seemed positively to bask in the sunshine of Mrs. Loraine's presence.

Even the most abstemious man alive has a love for the good things of this life hidden away in some little forgotten corner of his heart; and Mr. Traill enjoyed heartily the dainties served to him by the respectful Ellis with all the appetising accompaniments of sparkling glass, and snowy napery, and a flower-decked table. He hardly recognised in the delicate cubes and cutlets in Ellis's old silver dish the haricot he had known at home as a conglomerate of lukewarm carrots and mutton, clotted with fat, and sprinkled with cinders; for haricot was the dish Mrs. Thorn specially preferred to regale her master with on his return from Friday's school. It "kep' 'ot," as she believed, with less trouble

than most things, on a cunning arrangement of poker and tongs before the fire. It also gathered in volume by the falling of cinders thereon, but of such minor troubles of the *cuisine* Mrs. Thorn took no note. The "'arico'" was for master, not for herself.

It was pleasant, too, to be seated after lunch in a cosy armchair by Mrs. Loraine's fire, with all the latest reviews and that morning's *Times* within reach. And all these innocent pleasures were enhanced a thousandfold by the presence of gentlewomen—"the porcelain clay of human kind"—so very bright, busy, and unaffected as Mrs. Loraine and her stepdaughter.

He learned more of his charming parishioners in those few weeks than in all the years of his life in Rippleford before. He spoke with them freely of his many puzzles and annoyances, of his likings and of his dislikings; and found, especially about these

latter, such perfect sympathy between himself and his fair hostesses.

Mrs. Loraine talked over forlorn Mrs. Long's affairs with him; and together they had vowed to let sunshine in upon that and many another *blighted* existence.

Mary Blight was often to be found at The Beeches now. Mrs. Bird had carried off the sick Christina with her when she left; and the gentle, uncomplaining girl was half ashamed of enjoying herself too much among Mrs. Bird's cheerful young people. Mary was happy in the possession of her darling's bright letters. Mrs. Bird had indeed left a blessing behind her. *Hope*, and *love*, and *trust* had sprung up afresh under her fostering care in the hearts of Mrs. Blight's burden, the twins.

Mr. Traill was to keep a sort of watch over the unhappy Christina on her return, and to write to his friends about her and Mary.

They were never again to be allowed to fancy themselves friendless.

Sibyl charged him, indeed, with many a new care besides that of her giant bricklayer. She charged him, too, not to forget Mrs. Loraine and herself.

"Mind! we are to begin again just where we leave off, most reverend pastor! If you do not come back to lunch with us at once, and sit in your own chair, and go on with Thackeray, I shall join the MacBeggah Tweedy faction, and teach the children 'texties' you don't approve of. But if you are here to receive us on our return, and are very good indeed, I will give you 'The Newcomes' as a reward!"

And Mr. Traill laughed, and promised, and flourished his stick gaily as he departed.

"What a dear, good, simple-hearted, chivalrous gentleman he is, mamma," Sibyl said, as she turned back from this leave-taking to the hall.

"How little we knew of him really till now. Why can't we all be more neighbourly than we are, and regale one another sometimes with sympathy, instead of silks and satins and side dishes for ever."

"I really do believe we have made dear good Mr. Traill's life happier these few weeks past, love," Mrs. Loraine answered readily enough, cunningly adding, as she thought of *why* she was leaving home, "when we return we *will* try to bring our little world more closely still about us without silks and satins and side dishes! You have it in your power to do a great deal of good here, darling."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BEAUTY OF PENDRILLS.

"A rosebud set with little wilful thorns.
And sweet as English air could make her, she."
TENNYSON (*Princess*).

MRS. LORAINE and her step-daughter Sibyl spent their last evening at Pendrills.

Many were the small cares and responsibilities to be given over to Sibyl's faithful friend, the beautiful Margaret Burleigh, known to the little rural world of Rippleford as Miss Madge.

"Remember to go through the fernery now and then, Madge; and take any seedlings that look promising. Viner will be so bent

on surprising us with forced grapes and strawberries of gigantic size on our return, that he will disdain looking after the lovely common things I care for. We had quite a fight the other day because I told him I preferred roses and violets all the year round to his choicest orchids. And don't forget my pigeons. Do put on one of my garden hats when you feed them, and let them settle on you, and take a few peas or a little salt out of your hand. Don't let them learn to be contented with the scullery-maid or old Platt," Sibyl charged her friend.

"The poor widows' money is due every Saturday early. They all call for it, dear Madge. I would not trouble you," Mrs. Loraine said, turning round to smile upon the two friends in the cosy window recess, "but they do not like to receive their small pensions from the servants. And Mrs. Bunney's flannels are ready for the 1st of January."

"Mamma, do let Madge take them before that. The dear little 'mis-be-christened Jews,' as the mother says Mrs. Blight calls them, may be all half-frozen by the 1st of January."

Of course Mrs. Loraine never refused any request of her darling that she could grant, and Mrs. Bunney was to have her flannels early in November.

Sibyl and Madge prattled over their winter costumes, and their meeting in spring, and their promised correspondence. Madge was to draw Mary Blight to Pendrills, and to have sympathy ready for Mrs. Long on her return to Rippleford.

Mrs. Burleigh and Madge thought Sibyl had "forgotten it all," and was quite her old bright self. But Sibyl had seen how she had pained her mother, and still hankering after some heroic self-sacrifice, was trying to do her duty as she had learned to define it in her Catechism.

Very unwillingly, indeed, the friends parted; but it was one of Colonel Loraine's canons that the blood bays were never to be kept waiting in the cold, and the last words and last kisses were as few as they were hearty; the unwillingness was of warmly-expressed regret, not of lingering delay.

"How I shall miss you, dear Sibyl. But let me wrap you up well. Good-night. Good-bye."

Margaret Burleigh, who parted with such unaffected hearty love from her one great friend, Sibyl Loraine, was the beauty of Pendrills, of whom Mrs. Blight's bitterest speeches were usually made.

Mrs. Bird, indeed, had heard but a small part of Mrs. Blight's grievances regarding the unconscious Mrs. Burleigh and her beautiful only daughter. When Mrs. Blight drew her thin lips in most spitefully, or begged her gossip Mrs. Tweedy most solemnly to "mark

her words," Miss Burleigh's name was almost sure to follow.

"How dared she go on as she did with Mr. Vernon; never knowing her own mind one day from another."

The same thing might have been said of Mrs. Blight herself, for she would one day describe Miss Burleigh as "sly," the next as "over-demonstrative." One day as "bold," the next as "mincing and prudish."

According to Mrs. Blight's account, Miss Burleigh was a Janus-faced, heartless coquette. We can assure our readers she was nothing of the kind. She was as far as a high-spirited, tender-hearted, idolised girl can be, "*sans peur et sans reproche.*"

She ignored affectation, and was altogether free from prudishness, though as finely endowed with instinctive modesty as any English maiden we ever met, and we claim for English maidens the right to bear off the

palm in this respect from every nation in the world.

Full of enthusiasm and generous impulse as her friend Sibyl Loraine, and ever thinking less of herself than others, she might, indeed, sweet fool, "rush in, where angels fear to tread;" but there could be no doubt time would bring its gentle cure for this rashness, as it had for the brown tint of her skin, and the extreme thinness that had provoked Mrs. Blight into calling her a "little horror" as a child.

Time, that had given a peach-like bloom and dimples, that so amply justified the hopeful friends, who boasted how early they had seen the promise of Madge Burleigh's loveliness.

We hate descriptions of beauty, but how can we omit mention of Madge's wealth of glossy, rippled, dark-brown hair; with a red-gold sunset glow upon the ripples; or of her

proudly-set head; or of her lithe firm figure, or of her delicately-formed hands and feet, and the soft brown eyes that would have made any ugly face lovable.

Of all the exclamations of surprise or delight uttered at sight of Madge Burleigh, we ever thought "bewitching," the most appropriate and descriptive.

That Madge had, what Mrs. Blight called "a temper" we should be sorry to deny. It gave a life, a charm to her expression that no "mere white curd of asses' milk" will ever possess. Her lips were given to smiling very saucily at the pretty speeches—white lies—and petty vanities of her neighbours, great and small. Her soft brown eyes had been known to flash, and her smooth brows to frown when mean or silly sentiments were uttered in her hearing, even though Lady Vansittart herself may have rolled them out with a grandiloquence worthy of nobler motives.

Indeed, Miss Burleigh had not a mean or paltry trait of character in her composition. Her brother Douglas and his dear friend the Reverend Arthur Carey, the last Vicar of Rippleford had been her trainers and tutors. She had, therefore, heard more manly than womanly thoughts on many matters, and had imbibed quite unconsciously more of the spirit and frankness and independence of boyhood that is usual to most girls.

But we must beg our readers to remember that the "fast young woman" of the present day was unknown in the days of Margaret Burleigh's girlhood. That most odious of modern monstrosities had not then startled true women into asking "what next?"

Mr. Burleigh and his friend had not disdained the softer virtues of womanhood, they had merely striven to implant in the tender nature of their darling a share of their own

quiet courage, and the magnanimity that redeems our sex from the pettiness, helplessness, and idle rivalries of *paltry* womankind.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD DEAN.

"Shut up
In measureless content."
SHAKESPEARE (*Macbeth*, ii. 1).

WHEN not driving slowly through the lovely lanes round Greyminster, or niched into his stall in the cathedral, with his black velvet cap drawn well over his fine old head, Dean Ponsonby might be found shut into his old oak-paneled library, with the rich crimson cloth doors and curtains to protect him from the chill and the turmoil of the everyday world without.

Of all the good rooms of the stately Deanery that was his favourite, and in it he

had shown his last great effort of taste, and love of the comfortable.

This oak-paneled room looked out upon the finest old garden bit of the Cathedral Close. Out of Oxford perhaps no such stately elms, or velvet turf, or densely-tufted ivy had joined together to make a picture for an old clerical Don equal to that the Dean had made his one plate-glass window to the ground to look out upon. It was a perfect picture, framed in by the clustering evergreen roses and passion-flowers that basked upon a south front wall. The other windows were high, and deep, and old-fashioned, with panes of the same date as the panels—small with heavy frames.

The centre window alone of the five had the Dean allowed to be broken through, it might be a *vandalism,* but it was certainly a successful one; for every one admired his courage and that window.

The old Dean had long been oppressed by the height and bulk of his ancient bookcases. One fine day it came to him—like an inspiration—to have them divided, and fitted all round the room, and between the great windows to the ground. Upon them he then set his fine bronzes of Demosthenes and Cicero, with two or three Pompeian vases, and a model of the Parthenon; and here and there a terra-cotta pot to hold brilliant and precious greenhouse plants, for he delighted in flowers.

He then gave some of the family portraits that overcrowded his dining-room, and had them carefully let in to the panels above; and caused a long-neglected but valuable old Venetian glass to be hung over the smoke-dried mantelpiece.

He indulged himself with a new Turkey carpet, and several luxurious easy-chairs in rich crimson morocco binding, as he called it, and looking round he found the effect of his

conglomerate was to make the room as comfortable as it was remarkable; and he was well content, smiling to himself as he thought of the welcome he would give his old friend, the bishop's Beatrice, when she should come to live with him even as a daughter in that unrivaled room.

We have heard how mysteriously that hope had ended; and after that the poor old Dean looked round upon his work again, and doubted the wisdom of such changes "for a man of his age."

And then came graver and more depressing doubts still, as to the fairness of his retaining his preferment, now that he could neither preach nor listen with advantage to others or himself; and from that moment the soft carpet and luxurious chairs, the close companionship of his favourite books, the busts, the pictures ceased to charm.

He told himself he needed rest and

warmth, nothing more; and such should not be the condition of honest labourers in the Lord's vineyard.

He had been for many, many years an active, zealous friend and counsellor of the Bishop's, spending freely and well the liberal stipend of his honourable calling. His old friend was still hale and able-bodied, doing a fair if not full day's work for his hire; while the Dean told himself, and fairly, he was little better than a child, and in the way where honest labour and progress must be looked for.

Dean Ponsonby had worked out his salvation much to his own satisfaction, and with much charitable patience for those who had been stumbling-blocks in his way. His mind was quiet and easy; but the times no longer suited him. The Church even was not what it had been: "New men, new manners," a want of reverence; retorts, not always

courteous, shocked him. Even this last strange disappointment, or shame in his own family had not been as things in his best days had been.

It was time for him to resign, and his nephew's approval or disapproval could no longer influence him.

His friend the Bishop would support him against Henry Elliott, whose opposition could neither be loudly nor publicly 'expressed.

The young man's chief strength lay in his popularity; he was shorn of that, and with it perhaps of some of his self-sufficiency.

In deference doubtless to the Bishop's supposed displeasure, Mr. Elliott had not been invited to join the Greyminster Amateur Orpheus Club; and had a tenor of equal merit been found to replace him, that omission would have been as gall and wormwood to Mr. Elliott; but as it was, his substitute made one or two public

failures, and the old favourite was elated rather than depressed.

He gave his enemies few chances of snubbing him. His bearing under his cloud was admirable, and marked by the nicest shades of reserve or frankness, of *hauteur*, or deferential meekness, as his daily duties and contact with the Cathedral magnates might require.

He was a model minor canon, say what they would. There was no voice, no hands, no brow, no presence to be compared to his in all Greyminster, in the pulpit or out of it.

The old Dean was failing fast; he was his heir, or generally supposed to be so; for the old man had none nearer or dearer to him.

Henry Elliott felt that he might wait patiently for the return tide of Greyminster feeling, and he was so waiting, when Mrs. Loraine's offer of a visit, so eagerly accepted by the Dean, reminded him of the existence of a dangerous rival, and of his own pre-

carious hold of the old gentleman's affections and favour.

* * * * *

The Dean made much of his charming niece and great-nieces.

Mrs. Blake, his valued housekeeper, gave them the smiling, reverential welcome she had learned from the late Mrs. Ponsonby for the Dean's most valued friends.

The state guest-chamber, from which when the leaves were off the Rookery trees the shimmering of Sea-lieu Bay could be seen, the room Mrs. Ponsonby delighted in, and had adorned with her richest old china and inlaid furniture, was prepared for Mrs. Loraine and Sibyl. Grace chose to be alone always, and she took possession, in solitary grandeur, of the dimity bedroom overlooking the close.

The arrival of Dean Ponsonby's fair guests made quite a commotion in and around Grey-

minster. The grandees of the neighbourhood as well as the Cathedral greybeards were moved to unusual efforts to be amiable to such unexceptional visitors.

"Such beauties—quite little heiresses, too, in their way—were not to be met with every day," one or two neighbours said to one or two others, who they thought should exert their powers of pleasing.

There was quite a flutter of dissipation within the holy precincts of the Cathedral.

The Dean gave one or two dinners, whereat Mrs. Blake proved that her right hand had not forgot its cunning; and he gave also a delightful musical party. On this occasion Mr. Elliott secured the assistance of the Cathedral organist and his gentle daughter, and Grace Loraine alone, to carry out a programme of such sweetness and variety that he literally flooded the hearts of his hearers with a storm-wave of song.

The magnificent tenor, so grievously missed, was sweeter than words could describe. In Beethoven's "Adelaide," Schumann's "Spring Night," Schubert's "Hark! hark! the lark!" and Haydn's "In native worth and honour clad," he lavished that sweetness, but he was deaf to the almost penitent cries of applause as to the prayers of his audience for even a single *encore*.

Greyminster was made to feel acutely that Mr. Elliott sang for Dean Ponsonby and his fair relations alone. The admiration of the little world round him was as much a matter of indifference to him as the aid of the members of the Orpheus Society.

Henry Elliott stood alone, but unrivalled, with the old organist and the two young girls to throw his unrivalled powers into relief.

Nothing could be more enjoyable than the social successes of the winter in Greyminster.

Mrs. Loraine saw the bloom returning to her darling's cheeks—the light and joy of life once more animating every look and movement of the being she loved best,—and was happier than words can describe.

The girls made every day fresh projects, new interests, firmer friendships with the Dean's hospitable neighbours and friends. Time flew, and there seemed as many pleasures in store, as those the Miss Loraines had already enjoyed, in and about the Cathedral and its lovely neighbourhood. The circle of their magical influence increased from day to day, and no one suspected what Miss Loraine's *wish*, or her mother's *fear* had been, nor to what a tragic incident their long, bright visit was owing.

It would have been difficult indeed to persuade Greyminster that the death of a poor Irish bricklayer at Lynn was the cause of so much social interchange of thought, feel-

ing, and hospitality. And perhaps the only person to whom the curious contrast of cause and result occurred was Sibyl Loraine herself. She did not forget, she only seemed to do so; for the greater part of her happiness consisted in making others happy.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LADY OF THE MANOR.

"Superiors? death! and equals?—what a curse!
But an inferior not dependent?—worse."

POPE (*Characters of Women*).

MRS. BLIGHT, censorious Mrs. Blight, had one idol, and Mrs. Blight said in speaking of this idol: "She is perfection among the vulgar herd."

At sixty years of age Lady Vansittart of Rippleford Manor was a very august personage indeed. In her youth she had been described by the judges of such matters as a "devilish fine woman," and this description

was even more applicable to the gorgeous black and red and white beauty with which she strove to reproduce her memory of the past, when Nature withdrew her lavish gifts.

Her family was worthy of her. Her three daughters had married so well, that even among themselves they found it hard to decide which was the greatest lady.

With them we have little or nothing to do, save to mention that their great alliances shed lustre upon the mother as the general who had fought three such glorious matrimonial campaigns. Their visits to Rippleford were in one respect as those of angels', inasmuch as they were few and far between, and the visions were confined to the servants at the Manor; their mother's neighbours were rarely blessed even by the knowledge of their coming or going.

Sir Augustus Vansittart, the only son and heir of the Lady of the Manor, was as great

in his way as his mother—that is different from every one else, and above the reach of ordinary parallels.

He was an original, finding his occupations and pleasures anywhere and everywhere but in the beaten paths said to lead up to his position.

He was a successful game-rearer, a fair rough carpenter, a knowing groom, and a first-rate whip. Indeed on his coach-box he mounted to excellence, and literally as well as figuratively towered above his fellows.

From boyhood up to his present imperial measure of manhood at thirty-two, he was always spoken of as causing a good deal of difficulty.

The Rev. Matthew Traill, his quondam tutor, had required all the moral courage of his earnest nature to accept the charge placed in his hands by the sententious mother of the young giant, then in his seventeenth year and sadly neglected.

"I require you, sir," Lady Vansittart said in tones of hard authority, "to guide and influence Sir Augustus Vansittart according to my views, and to bring him forward with the neglected branches of his education as rapidly as possible. He is a very remarkable boy. I do not choose to be brought into collision with him myself. No amount of reasoning has had any effect on him hitherto, and of course coercion is out of the question. He inherits his character and great firmness from myself, and I have no doubt he will do very well in the end; but meanwhile the responsibility will rest upon you."

There were many reasons why a good home and a large salary should not be lightly rejected by the gentle and learned Matthew Traill, but the responsibility thus set before him suddenly was almost more than he had heart for, as the saying is; for he saw no hope of any sympathy in his struggles, or of

even a courteous recognition of his services from the imperious mother, whose manner towards him was only a shade less severe than that of the haughty butler who had ushered him into the presence-chamber.

He felt that in the suite of rooms set apart for him, in a cold wing of the rambling old Manor, overlooking a back yard surrounded with inferior offices, he would be as utterly alone as Alexander Selkirk on the island of Juan Fernandez, without being monarch of anything he surveyed, and probably with every right disputed. As little chance was there that he

> "Might learn from the wisdom of age"

as

> "Be cheered by the sallies of youth."

His friends, Mr. Burleigh and Arthur Carey, the then Vicar of Rippleford, had evidently thought more of his pecuniary gain than of his aspiration to do good and gain

honour in so doing. He was profoundly discouraged, and was turning over in his mind the best mode of retreating from a false position, when his door was thrown open by the "very remarkable boy" himself, who came to offer with rough hospitality, mingled with keen curiosity, to "show him over the place, and find out what kind of things he cared about."

"Mr. Burleigh thought you might be happy enough in my father's library," the young giant continued; "but if you know anything of dogs, I wish you'd just come and see my bull-terriers. Old Sir Henry Vernon's can't hold a candle to them! Besides, his poor beasts don't know him when they see him. Mine are *everything* to me!"

And Mr. Traill saw the place, and the bull-terrier pups, and found his pupil, too, rather like a younger Alexander Selkirk without any humanising memories to "reconcile man

to his lot ;" and we need hardly say he did not resign his responsibilities, but, on the contrary, attached himself to them ; and it is but fair here to state that he never repented having done so.

There had been a Sir *William* Vansittart. He had done all that his family required of him early in life by marrying his heiress-cousin, and was content to be known for the next fifteen years of his life as Lady Vansittart's husband—as many a V.C. is proud to be known through life by the fame of one brave and daring exploit.

He was not, therefore, much missed when, on one occasion, Lady Vansittart returned from abroad in a close cap, and told her neighbours that she had " buried Sir William at Mentone."

Lady Vansittart bore her bereavement as she bore herself—nobly. She at once devoted herself to the perfecting and settlement in

life of her three handsome daughters, and that great work being accomplished with *éclat*, she gave her unruly son into Mr. Traill's gentle hands, and devoted herself to the social regeneration of the little world surrounding her ancestral acres, and was ready to advise and admonish all who came within the mystic boundary she called the circle of her acquaintance.

She accepted the responsibilities fate portioned out to her in a very different spirit from that of most lone women.

She recognised all the claims of society upon her time, her strength, and her income.

She was never known to tremble at any emergency, or to shrink from any duty of inflicting pain.

We therefore think she was fully entitled to be considered what she claimed to be, "a very remarkable woman," and the greatest blessing that could possibly have been be-

stowed upon a country neighbourhood, peopled with the waifs and strays of tempests of grief or change—anchorless widows and drifting orphans.

In such a neighbourhood a strong-minded, clear-headed, well-to-do chief of some kind is grievously needed; and Lady Vansittart dealt courageously with its small social puzzles, and informed the few depressed gentlemen that sickness or misfortune tethered within the circle of her acquaintance, that "half-pay officers, old Indians, and invalid unemployed clergymen were the ruin of every society in which they had any voice." And no one had dared to contradict her.

There was a report, indeed, that Commodore Briggs had struck his crutch violently through the worm-eaten floor of his smoking-arbour at Nelson Villa, and sworn that he would "blow her out of the water if she ever

said anything of the kind on his quarter-deck!" but nobody but Mrs. Blight believed it.

Rippleford generally adored in trembling its Lady of the Manor. She was magnet strong enough to draw the military out of Lynn; she gave its largest croquet-parties, and hunt-breakfasts, and dinner-parties; and she was the mother of the richest unmarried man within driving distance of the many mothers with many unmarried daughters who made the society of Rippleford so terribly tame, when it was not downright sluggish.

CHAPTER XVI.

"HE WAS IN THE DIVORCE COURT."

"Around him some mysterious circle thrown
Repell'd approach, and show'd him still alone;
Upon his eye sate something of reproof,
That kept at least frivolity aloof;
And things more timid that beheld him near,
In silence gazed, or whisper'd mutual fear;
And they the wiser, friendlier few confess'd
They deem'd him better than his air express'd."

BYRON (*Lara*).

OUR story would be incomplete if we omitted all notice of Sir Augustus Vansittart's personal appearance, for it was as remarkable and as unlike that of his fellows as his training and his tastes.

He was enormous; heavy, high-shouldered,

with a head almost too large for the huge shoulders on to which it was so closely set.

His eyes were somewhat *à fleur de tête,* and his jaws massive. He would have been described as elephantine, if every one had not seen that he bore a ludicrous resemblance to the elephant's comparatively modern rival in unwieldy size, the hippopotamus.

Any one acquainted with the outlines of animal nature must know at once, that though no baronet with fifteen thousand a year can be called a repulsive creature, we cannot honestly represent Sir Augustus as an attractive man.

His unloved and unlovely life had had an evil influence upon his outer man. He affected, even if he did not feel, utter indifference to the opinions and feelings of others. He assumed an air of almost

brutal indifference, and was often avoided as a brute.

But the close friendship existing between Mr. Traill and his old pupil led some few charitably-disposed neighbours to believe there must be some good in Lady Vansittart's heir. Mr. Traill was one of those simple, kindly creatures who are easily wounded, even by a sharp word, and though Mr. Traill had often spoken of the Baronet's wrongs and disadvantages, he never complained of any of his own; so it is but fair to suppose that the huge young man to whom he had devoted six years of his life had a heart, and had given him an "Open Sesame!" to it.

Mr. Traill had been also known to declare, that Sir Augustus possessed a power of attracting all he cared to draw into his intimacy. He had undoubted power over all the animals he delighted in; no horse, however vicious, but he could tame; no dog, however

savage, but he could soothe and win the confidence of; and his people, those in daily service about him, gave him the simple praise of being "the right sort for a master!" With two luckless exceptions, hereafter to be confessed, Sir Augustus's few acknowledged friends were, in every way, a credit to his choice.

Colonel Meredith, of H.M. 1st Flamingoes, now again stationed at Lynn, was one of those men whose regard reflects honour on their friends. He was the very soul of honour himself; and a tried and valued authority, from the mysterious Horse-Guards themselves, down to the little drummers practising with wearied arms their unrivaled roll upon the furzy hillside beyond the parade ground at Lynn.

Mr. Burleigh, the popular ex-member for West Rootshire, and Arthur Carey, the beloved late Vicar of Rippleford, were stanch

friends of the huge Baronet. One and all agreed that "If Vansittart had had a father or a mother worth anything, he would have been a first-rate fellow; and that suit of the Kerr Pagets would never have been heard of!"

That suit had been in the Divorce Court, and had failed, for the Pagets were only separated. And the petitioner, cut even by the doubtful world in which he had striven to keep a place, was now an outlaw. Still, Mrs. Blight could not bring herself to believe that any man could be brought so close to the brink of dishonour by foolish, pitiful trust, and reckless liberality, as Sir Augustus had been brought; nor could she recognise in his sturdy, self-respecting opposition to the Pagets' plot any better motive than brazen impudence.

Mrs. Paget flaunted herself in Parisian costumes and her celebrated diamond serpent bracelets before the little world of Rippleford

and Lynn on every public occasion possible ; and kept Mrs. Blight's memory fresh and full of the bitterest suspicions regarding the supposed donor of the diamonds ; the man who had been wheedled to such an extent by that artful jade, and showed such resolute indifference to the innocent wiles of so many dear girls living all round him.

Sir Augustus, indeed, withdrew himself almost entirely from the gaieties of the neighbourhood after what Mrs. Blight persisted in calling "his awful scandal!" And on the few occasions he did appear he had wrapped himself in such haughty reserve that none could say he had ventured to make himself agreeable, or to desire to be forgiven.

He said by his bearing as distinctly as possible : "There is no need to assume any virtuous indignation ; take no trouble on my account, I give you credit for it all."

It is equally certain that the heads of

families round Rippleford were far more sorry than Sir Augustus that any need of any such defiant retirement had arisen.

The fear that the beautiful owner of the diamond serpents had made a bonfire of the Baronet's heart, and burnt it up for her own wicked amusement, was one reason for looking on her with such horror. It was less her supposed sin, than the "consequences to the neighbourhood at large," as it was vaguely described, that excited the popular wrath. And if Sir Augustus would only have humbled himself, or even have taken a cup of early tea, or a croquet-mallet from the hands of his detractors, there was not one that would not gladly have given her word for it, that he was an innocent and honourably acquitted man.

But whatever else Sir Augustus thought of his neighbours, he never thought of stooping to conciliate them. And with a few excep-

tions in favour of his friends, or neighbours like Mrs. Burleigh, Mrs. Vernon, and Mrs. Loraine — from whose houses his absence would have been too marked on great occasions of hospitality—he refused all invitations; and restricted himself to doing the honours for his mother at the Manor with the gravity of a mute at a funeral.

The younger members of village society openly deplored his gloom, and the "impossibility of getting up anything in a neighbourhood where the only gentlemen were either too old or too gouty to join them, or travelling, or under a cloud."

Madge Vernon declared Sir Augustus's sadness was infectious. "I can't be saucy when I am in the room with him, or enjoy myself; he makes me feel so wretched," she said one unhappy day in Mrs. Blight's hearing to Sibyl Loraine, for her friend answered gaily and most imprudently:

"He is not sad; he is only lonely, and immeasurably superior to all of us inferior little animals; like the great hippopotamus at the Zoological Gardens! I should like to tease him and rouse him: to run my hand along his cage, and make him fling all his savage strength against the barriers between us, and roar *à pleine gorge.*"

And delightful mischief Mrs. Blight made later, in quoting this merry fancy to Lady Vansittart.

The accurate Miss Eliza Blight remarked she thought every one had a perfect right to be disagreeable if he chose. And her friends, the Miss MacBeggah Tweedys disputed the assertion on religious grounds, that went far to prove they availed themselves of the right whether they suspected themselves to be doing so or not.

Mr. Traill, through all, was the bulky Baronet's firm friend. He sought his help in

all parish difficulties, his companionship as his greatest solace, his intimacy in hopes of cheering what was at best a wasted life.

"If it was not for his own sake," the good man told Mrs. Loraine, "I should much regret his leaving home. But he is altogether misunderstood and lost here. How I shall miss him, to be sure!"

And Sir Augustus went abroad.

"To Mentone, to visit his father's grave! Well, that is a cheerful commencement to his travels!" said Mrs. Blight, who, when she could not fling a stone, flung a sneer. "And then he goes on to Florence and to Rome, and is to return after a long cruise in his yacht. To think of such a monster having such pleasures lavished on him! But there—he can no more enjoy them than the pigs could the pearls."

It was, indeed, a dreary winter to good

Mr. Traill—his quondam pupil cruising in the Mediterranean, and The Beeches closed in Mrs. Loraine's long absence.

He found some solace in visiting poor young Mrs. Long. She had returned from Mrs. Bird's bright home with a store of health that helped her to bear up against the news from Trinidad. Mr. Traill had been charged to break to her gently, that Mr. Long had undertaken a voyage round the world, and that letters—if they ever found him—must long wait for answers.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT MRS. LORAINE WENT TO GREYMINSTER FOR.

> "Sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
> To have a thankless child."
>
> SHAKESPEARE (*King Lear*, i. 4).

"My dear," the old Dean said to Mrs. Loraine, gently and sorrowfully one morning, soon after her departure for Rippleford had been fixed for the ensuing week. "I think you should give me a few weeks more of your company now. I confess this engagement of Henry Elliott to your Grace has taken me completely by surprise. I ought to know more of a dear child that must soon be to me as a daughter."

"What do you say! what——"

Mrs. Loraine was speechless. Was her uncle dreaming, or was she herself?

"My dear," again said the Dean. "I wish you had told me of it yourself. The little scene I came upon in the drawing-room this morning hurt me. Of course there can be no harm in Elliott's kissing his intended wife, nor in Grace's returning such natural caresses, still it pained me to think I should be the last to hear of the happiness of those so near and dear to me."

Mrs. Loraine felt positively ill with surprise, and she could scarcely find voice to answer.

"Dear Uncle Ponsonby, what can I say——"

"I give you my word," the dear old gentleman went on, tenderly avoiding to look at her as he uttered his plaintive apologetic reproof—"I give you my word I thought they kept away from us to practise their songs. I

felt quite as much embarrassed as Elliot seemed, at coming so suddenly upon the truth. I hope you don't blame me, my dear Dora."

But Mrs. Loraine was in no condition to blame anybody. She was hiding her face on the back of the Dean's high chair, sobbing, murmuring of her own surprise; "grief," "shame," "deceit," "ingratitude" too were words heard among the poor mother's agitated sobs; and it gradually dawned upon her uncle that perhaps his surprise and pain were as nothing compared to that of his poor niece Dorothea Loraine's.

"Forgive me, uncle," at last she forced herself to say to him intelligibly; "I know nothing but what you have told me. But it is all so unlike what my daughter's conduct should be. I did not believe this of her. The blow has fallen so suddenly."

"Sudden, indeed!" Then said the Dean

with unusual energy, and almost scorn in his voice: "Elliott tells me it was settled within a fortnight of your arrival. That was sudden enough, but the concealment is worse. My dear, did you, did Sibyl not know of it? Did neither of you suspect it?"

"Oh! no! no! We have all been equally deceived," Mrs. Loraine had to own. Her face was burning, every pulse was beating with a sudden, overwhelming sense of her daughter's duplicity, now that the fact was forced upon her. She was learning Lear's hard lesson, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child."

"Oh! Grace! Grace!" the poor outraged mother said in her heart; "I am glad your dear father cannot suffer all I suffer now." This was the hardest thought of all, and it came again and again. Mrs. Loraine could not forgive herself for thinking it; it seemed too cruel, too bitter, almost unnatural. But

it was there, ever-present, ever-pressing, as the vision of Henry Elliott—the betrayer of the Bishop's trust, and of the Dean's trust and hospitality—kissing her Grace rose before her. "Oh! my Grace, my own baby!" the mother's heart continued its cry; "how could you let such a man persuade you to forget all womanly modesty, all truth, all honour in two weeks, and deceive us so! Uncle, I must have time to think; I must see Sibyl. I am not fit to talk to you now. I will be guided by your wishes afterwards, as to staying or going, and all else regarding my daughter and Mr. Elliott."

Saying this as quietly as she could, Mrs. Loraine bent and kissed the Dean's bald head, and left him without once having shown him her sorrowful face fully.

There was no need to tell Sibyl that her mother was ill with grief, when Mrs. Loraine found her true daughter in her own room.

"Come to me, my dear, and help me to bear it," Mrs. Loraine said, and hiding her face in her hands she sobbed as she had never sobbed since she had heard her husband's coffin carried forth, with that muffled, close-crowding tread that, once heard, can never be forgotten. Why did she think of that now? Were the same nerves of brain and heart under torture? Was her present despair and shame equal to that grief, the greatest wrench of her whole life?

"What is it, darling mother? Tell me, precious mother! Who has done this?"

The girl's arms were round her as she spoke, for an instant only; she flew for water, restoratives, and would have rung for Prue, but Mrs. Loraine sobbed out, "Lock the door—let us be alone, love. Oh, Sibyl, it is Grace!—Uncle Ponsonby found her; they have confessed;—it has been ever since the second week of our visit."

"What? Mamma! Who? Oh! mother, do try and tell me calmly."

"Mr. Elliott was kissing her; and they confessed they have been engaged since the second week of our being here."

"Oh! that hateful man!" cried Sibyl, blushing to her finger-tips. "When we first came he pretended to be sighing still for the Bishop's Beatrice, and only a few days afterwards he—Mamma, you must forbid it, and save her from that hateful, sham-pious puppy."

This outburst did Mrs. Loraine good. When the grief to be soothed comes from a wrong and not from a loss, there is nothing like indignant sympathy.

"It is a fraud on his part, and fancy on hers. Let us take her home, mother. She will see her old flames there. They, at least, are honest gentlemen."

But Mrs. Loraine still had that unhappy vision of Mr. Elliott kissing Grace before her

eyes. And she instinctively felt that she could never again build castles in the air, or dream sweet motherly dreams for the Grace who had thus revealed her true nature and had deceived them so for months past.

Some inner voice was saying to her : "She has found a fitting mate. All that mother, sister, training and example can do, has been utterly wasted on that girl." Now the poor mother could understand why the deceitful Jane Tweedy was her chosen friend.

"Poor mother," the inner voice said, "let her go ; give her into stronger hands for guidance—before it is too late."

But it was hard indeed that the deceiver of the Bishop's two innocent daughters was to be to Mrs. Loraine in place of a son.

And Mrs. Loraine told Sibyl all that her conscience, that inner voice, had whispered, and Sibyl had no better counsel to offer ; so she contented herself with seating herself at

her mother's knees, and soothing her with loving clasps, as she promised her solemnly, tenderly kissing the hand she held :

"I will never leave you, mother, as you feared. Never, darling, never!"

* * * * *

There was still more pain in store for Mrs. Loraine. She sent for Grace, and spoke to her, we may be sure, "more in sorrow than in anger;" but instead of acknowledging any fault, the young lady had the audacity to impute to her mother the wish that Sibyl might have fascinated Mr. Elliott instead of herself.

As for being on honour with them all, she did not know why she should be. She neither believed in, nor wanted their love. She had chosen for herself, and should abide by her choice. "Of course if you like to make a hubbub and a scandal you may. It will only show how right we were

not to tell you anything of our intentions before."

When she finished this speech Grace Loraine left her mother's room.

Mr. Elliott's account of his engagement was, that his heart was caught in its rebound. He had not been happy in his first affection. Grace, so like her mother, so everything a man could desire as friend, and companion, and helpmeet, with so much beauty, and so much innocent frankness — well, he fairly owned he had lost his head.

He hoped Mrs. Loraine had no scruples as to the right of the clergy to marry. At one time he had been vexed with doubts on that question; but he had the firmest conviction now that his eternal salvation might be imperilled—. Exactly. He did not wish to press a subject that was distasteful to Mrs. Loraine, but she had hinted at a want of frankness; he wished to conceal none of his youthful doubts

or present convictions—nothing could be further from his thoughts. He hoped the matter might end as speedily as he could desire. "For Grace fancies she will be happier now with me than with you, dearest Mrs. Loraine," he ended, smiling with a mock modesty and implied insolence that completed his hearer's disgust.

"What is that I hear?" the Dean said angrily. He had come in while Mr. Elliott was finishing his self-satisfied explanation, and the last few words of it roused all the old gentleman's suppressed indignation. "Not content with robbing my niece Mrs. Loraine of her daughter, you would insinuate that you do so as the deliverer of a child in distress? My dear Dorothea, give me leave to speak to Elliott alone. Let me express my opinion of his conduct if I must conceal all expression of my feeling for that of your graceless daughter. And let me take upon myself

the duties of your nearest male relative until Colonel Loraine is here to guide and advise you."

Mrs. Loraine gladly left them. Indeed, she felt herself quite unable to deal with the assuming hypocrisy of the smooth-tongued Henry Elliott.

"Now, sir," the indignant Dean continued, when Mrs. Loraine had left the room, "I have to request that you listen in silence to the few words I have to say to you. You have already brought shame enough upon my training and the profession I have reared you for, by your conduct to my old friend the Bishop's daughters. The mystery of that affair had perhaps better not be solved. The innocent girls have escaped your double dealing. I will not name them in connection with your present offence."

"Offence?" Mr. Elliott ventured to remonstrate.

"Offence," the Dean repeated emphatically. "While there is still a plain code of honour for men's guidance, and truth and integrity are not words alone to be idly bandied between man and man, the world has a right to demand from a minister of Christ's Church a higher standard of honour and morality than from a non-professing layman. Your conduct in this affair with Grace Loraine, in concealing for months a matter of vital importance to all concerned, and using your influence to destroy the good faith of the woman you pretend to love, is an offence against good feeling and an outrage to the profession to which you belong."

"There is no pretence, sir, in my affection for Grace Loraine," Mr. Elliott hastened to assure the Dean, hoping to mollify his anger. "It is perfectly honest and purely disinterested."

"We will hope it may prove so," Dean

Ponsonby replied dryly. "If Colonel Loraine sees your conduct in the light I do, and yet consents to give his niece to you, I trust he will take care to secure her against interested motives on your part. I confess I have lost all confidence in you, and all that remains for me to say is, that until you are reputably acknowledged as Miss Loraine's accepted suitor, or until Mrs. Loraine finds it convenient to remove her daughter from your reach, you must absent yourself from my house. I should insist on this if you were a stranger; the measure is doubly needful because you are my nephew and a churchman. I will not countenance such a lapse from honest dealing."

Even as he longed to revolt against his uncle's authority, and to hurl back an angry defiance to his reproaches, Henry Elliott felt discretion now to be the better part of valour; and he mastered himself sufficiently, or rather

was hypocrite enough to conceal his baffled rage, and to reply in words of submissive regret.

He "deeply regretted the misconception that dictated such needless severity" on the Dean's part.

He "could only hope submission to his wishes might be construed aright—not as a confession of his having violated any canon in the code of the nicest honour between man and man, but as son-like obedience to his uncle's every wish;" and so saying, he left to prepare for his departure. And we grieve to say the old Dean seemed to put no faith in the "son-like submission to his every wish." On the contrary, his words were bitter as the young man left the room, and sounded like "palaver," and "plausible scamp."

And the poor old Dean drew his black velvet cap closely down over his ears, and shrunk into one of his favourite easy-chairs,

sadder and more weary than it is possible to say; his only comfort being the conviction that he had held firmly to the guiding principles of his own honourable life and calling.

Colonel Loraine joined his sister-in-law at Greyminster with as little delay as possible, and his displeasure at Mr. Elliott's secret wooing was as full of distrust and contempt as the old Dean's. They were both men of the old school of honour; and though all things are said to be fair in love and war, the things that came under this category were rather deeds of daring than of dastardly deceit.

Colonel Loraine's advice, after hearing all sides of the question, was not unlike that of the inner voice that had urged Mrs. Loraine to give her daughter into stronger hands before it was too late.

Colonel Loraine would not have liked to explain his reasons for yielding to the suit of Henry Elliott, nor to have owned that he

thought the match was a fitting one. He felt poignant regret that his opinion of his youngest niece had never been one to inspire him with any loving hopes of a bright future.

Seeing her as he did, with considerable intervals between his visits, and judging her as an experienced man of the world, he was clearer-sighted to her traits of character, and to the development of her unlovely nature, than her mother or Sibyl.

Colonel Loraine, therefore, gave his consent to his niece's speedy marriage, after one or two long and somewhat animated interviews with Mr. Elliott.

Mr. Elliott had greedily believed the report of the Miss Loraines' wealth, and had heard with great satisfaction, we may believe, that Mrs. Loraine's fortune had been considerable, while her husband's "family" was all that could be desired in point of "position."

It was a surprise to him, however, to learn that it was the former Mrs. Loraine who had been the wealthy woman, and that Sibyl was her sole heiress.

Grace would have little or nothing now, and a very moderate portion hereafter; and his loudly vaunted disinterestedness would have an excellent opportunity of proving itself to be all it pretended to be.

Colonel Loraine was something of a physiognomist, and he was much interested by the play of emotions that chased over Henry Elliott's countenance during his frank and soldierly abrupt explanation of his nieces' separate interests.

But Colonel Loraine was not a man to be trifled with, and Mr. Elliott resigned himself to the fate he had grasped so greedily in his haste to secure beauty and riches, in spite of his first failure.

If Grace Loraine found her lover's profes-

sions somewhat cooled by his exposure to the truth, she did not complain of the circumstance. She was not, as we know, of a very sensitive nature.

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Mr. Elliott was therefore reputably acknowledged as the accepted suitor of Miss Grace; and the mother's return to Rippleford was hastened to prepare bridal trappings for her thankless daughter.

The Dean, the Colonel, and Mrs. Loraine could only hope that the attraction that had drawn the young people out of the usual course of duty to those nearest, and supposed to be dearest to them, might prove strong enough to keep them staunch to the duties they had undertaken towards each other.

Letters soon came pouring in with congratulations to all concerned. "Mrs. Loraine has got what she went to Grey-

minster for!" Mrs. Blight said; telling unconsciously the exact truth, as Sibyl's tender promise to her mother allows us to hope.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY VANSITTART'S GARDEN PARTY.

"Ladies, like variegated tulips, show
'Tis to their changes half their charms we owe."
POPE (*Characters of Women*).

WHEN Mrs. Loraine returned from Greyminster towards the end of March it was almost summer in Rippleford, so balmy and genial had been the air and the showers in the earlier days of that usually ungenial month. The bedding-plants were all out and thriving; the croquet lawns were like velvet; lilacs, laburnums, guelder roses, and hawthorn made fragrant blinds for the dwellers in all the road-side villas round

Rippleford; and her own beautiful gardens were ablaze with the old and new favourites that Sibyl delighted in, from the old purple velvet iris, and scarlet anemones, to the graceful "dielytra spectabilis" and "skimmia fragrans," that were then only beginning to feel themselves at home in English soil.

Sibyl Loraine often wished plants could have their own *pet* names imported with them, and not be known only, as they so often are, by the Latinised English names of their botanist captors. She declared that this year she would defy Viner and his myrmidons, and label every plant and flower with easy and descriptive pet names of her own; only may, heartsease, violets, and lilies of the valley should be sacred from interference; and *all* roses should be *worshipped*, in spite of the little zinc titles hanging round their necks.

After the long visit to Greyminster and

the stately and solemn Cathedral Close, the delights of her own home, so wide-spread, so glorious in colour and sweetness, filled her heart to overflowing, and left no time for brooding, or for missing the valuable mental companionship Dean Ponsonby had brought to bear on her short spell of morbid feeling.

Now that Mrs. Loraine had returned, and that Rippleford rejoiced in the presence of all its most important residents, spring gaieties impended.

Sir Augustus Vansittart had returned from his cruise in the Mediterranean, and was now daily to be seen driving his high mail-phaeton with splendid high-stepping roans to and from the barracks at Lynn, or along the great stretches of the open common beyond the ford, towards Vernon's Chase.

The big Baronet's only companion was a keenly intelligent little bull-terrier. In and out of her beloved master's presence, however,

this petted little beauty, "Nell Gwynne," never stopped shivering; and this habit, joined to the sad, eager expression of her white face, gave her a comical look of having seen better days, and of finding herself now in the position of poor relation to some one or other not explained.

The whole of Shepley Common, with its turfy rides under the shadow of the old oaks and beeches, and across the great sandy roads —and a perfect network of sheep-paths in among the hawthorns and wild roses—towards Dullford, belonged to the Manor of Rippleford. In all England there was no sweeter expanse of fresh breezes and wild nature to be enjoyed. No wonder the owner loved to exercise his horses there, drawing in all the while long breaths of bitter-sweet, herb-scented air; and rejoicing his eyes with a widely-extended view over his distant farms and forest lands.

Mr. Vernon, too, might often be found coming over the common on one of his famous Persian mares, to or from Vernon's Chase, with his escort of lean but lordly pets, his Irish deerhounds, surrounding him. He and they were well used to the admiring salutations and remarks of all they met. Well-trained and obedient to a sign even, the hounds were as gentlemanlike a set of dogs as they were pure in breed, and faultlessly handsome in form and colour.

There were as yet no dog-shows to make them famous, but Guy Vernon's deerhounds had sat to the great Landseer, and their portraits figure in many of the national treasures we have by the great Sir Edwin.

Indeed Guy Vernon's escort once seen was never forgotten, following him thus, soft and silently, as he rode. The many depressed maiden sisters that abounded in Rippleford felt it was a bright day when

either of the manly young magnates of that side of the county had blessed their sight; for they might then hope that Lady Vansittart would think it time to give some of her hospitable invitations. And Lady Vansittart's invitations were as a trumpet-call in the stillness of Rippleford life. No matter how scattered the village forces might be, they felt it their duty to muster gallantly upon her lawns when the notes reached them.

They also felt that in her superior presence all petty rivalries, all vexatious dissensions must cease, and seem, at least, to be forgiven. There Mrs. Blight did not dare to refuse a smile as well as a bow of recognition to Mrs. Vernon, as she often did coming out of church.

There even Sibyl Loraine and Madge Burleigh were comparatively safe from her malevolent asides; and her neighbours gene-

rally suffered less from her rebukes than from her eager and active curiosity.

There Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy's religious gloom took an almost cheerful ray of hope that some eligible young men might some day or other rid her of two or three of her "precious girls," and that she might draw one or two worldlings into the sad and text-paved path she termed "The Way." There were few pleasures, indeed, that Mrs. MacBeggah thought innocent, but she was fond, very fond of good dishes; and Lady Vansittart's lobster aspics were very good.

There Mrs. Loraine enjoyed thoroughly the happy, bright looks of her own and her neighbours' pretty daughters, and thereby secured for herself more happiness than usually falls to the lot of a *passée* beauty.

She enjoyed the idle afternoon among her favourite neighbours immensely. Indeed, Lady Vansittart felt that, when Mrs. Loraine

and Mrs. Burleigh were once settled among groups that instinctively gathered round them, and the handsome Willie Meredith and young Carteret and Crawford Ffrancks were in charge of the croquet-ground with Madge and the two Loraines, the afternoon was sure to be only too short for all the chat and merry doings of the young people.

There the riders of the hardest-mouthed hobbies dismounted, and walked harmlessly among their fellow-creatures.

There, in fact, the very dough of Rippleford society tried to rise to its best with the leaven that Lady Vansittart poured into it.

The croquet-ground in front of the great conservatory at the Manor was an unrivalled stretch of velvety turf.

Many matches might be carried on at once upon it, and it was rare that even the spent balls of rovers lost themselves in the flower-

beds that bordered it with such a fragrant and many-coloured arabesque.

The great cedars and limes cast strange and beautiful effects of light and shade over the animated Watteau-like groups passing or resting on the lawn.

Lady Vansittart and the matrons she drew from a distance to envy the glories of her home, and her endless ranges of "glass," had favourite chairs, and many-coloured rugs, and cushions, spread in picturesque confusion upon the low terrace surrounding the conservatory; while the rheumatic or aged guests found safer repose on all sorts of well-protected seats on the broad, golden gravel paths.

On the special occasion of which we are writing the business of pleasure had not commenced. Sir Augustus's large party from Lynn had not arrived; and a mere pretence of play, a very poor pretence it was, was carried on with the

Miss Tweedys and Commodore Briggs' fat son in his first tail-coat, and one or two stray curates; and one or two friends of guests "who didn't know a soul, you know," played with other strangers. Grace Loraine was there, passing under the limes to and fro, keeping her minor canon Henry Elliott to strict allegiance.

Sibyl wandered up and down past her mother's chair, practising some new stroke admirably adapted for the display of *bien gantée* hands, and coquettish bronze boots.

"Are you all speaking of Miss Burleigh's beauty, mamma?" she stopped to ask mischievously, having heard Guy Vernon's name mentioned in Mrs. Blight's hardest tones, followed by a question in the air of "What can he find to admire in such a face?"

"It is certainly never two days alike," simpered silly Mrs. Briggs.

Lady Vansittart expressed her surprise at Miss Burleigh's declining her invitation. She "could not consider Mrs. Burleigh's feverish cold any excuse for her breaking her promise to bring her music to the Manor. Lady Almeria Chetwynd was coming expressly to hear her sing;" and we all know how little great ladies approve of being disappointed.

"Nothing would induce Madge to leave her mother when she is suffering, Lady Vansittart," Sibyl said courageously; "you don't know her."

Mrs. Briggs here laughed, for the Commodore's chair was a long way off, and declared on good authority "that she knew Mr. Vernon was coming over from the Chase to-day."

"That accounts for everything," Mrs. Blight remarked bitterly. And she went on to state her utter astonishment that Mrs.

Burleigh could allow the intimacy to continue on its present footing between her daughter and such a wild young man as Mr. Vernon. She had been present when Mr. Vernon returned from Constantinople, "and though Miss Burleigh was then fully seventeen years old—far too old to dash away into the hall, and open the door to him, as if she was the footman—Mrs. Burleigh's entreaty of 'Stay, child, it may not be Guy,' was as if it had never been spoken. I never saw greater impropriety in my life," Mrs. Blight went on, working herself up to a state of indignation worthy of a deeper wrong. "She brought him in almost hanging on his arm, and crying out: 'It is Guy, mamma, in a great Turkish beard!' Every one knows," added Mrs. Blight as a climax to this horrible story of violated British modesty, "what an effect that sort of hearty, *hail-fellow-well-met-ishness* has upon shy awkward men. I date Mr.

Vernon's ridiculous infatuation from that moment."

"Many others besides Mr. Vernon are infatuated by Miss Burleigh's heartiness and unaffected feeling," kind Mrs. Loraine said in her sweet, conciliatory voice, to turn the tide of feeling into a kindlier channel.

"So many," cried the indignant Sibyl, waxing eager to attack Madge's enemy, "that it is almost impossible to make any party succeed without her. Her sweet voice and beaming face act as a charm."

If Lady Vansittart could have withered by her frown, Miss Loraine would henceforth have been as wrinkled as the poppies surmounting the blonde napolitaine on her ladyship's crown of purple-black hair.

It was a relief to Mrs. Loraine to see her imprudently outspoken darling pass unscathed to the croquet-lawn again; as the grinding of gravel, and the rattle of many

curb-chains and crossbars gave comforting notice of the arrival of the drags from Lynn. And as the handsome, manly dandies of Colonel Meredith's regiment hastened to receive Lady Vansittart's stately welcome, Miss Burleigh and her face were, by common consent gladly consigned to oblivion.

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"The party was not a success. I don't think I can remember any such utter failure as to-day's, ma'am, in all my experience of social dreariness at home," Sir Augustus had told his mother, after bidding adieu to his own especial party from Lynn. "The young men did their best, but it would be well to be sure of the Vernons and Burleighs, and a few others likely to get on, before inviting the ruck to stupefy one another and their betters."

The party was not a success, Lady Vansittart had owned it to herself before he spoke.

The guests would not mix; they curdled into hard, vexatious lumps, and the whole thing was spoilt.

Even the courteous winning ways of Colonel and Mrs. Meredith, and the gay young officers from Lynn, had failed to leaven the dough this time.

Lady Almeria Chetwynd had answered in little more than monosyllables, instead of talking to everybody of everything, as she did when she was satisfied and gracious, and Miss Burleigh was to sing for her. And Mrs. Blight had victimised and depressed all she came near.

The wrong people had been matched at croquet. Grace Loraine would neither play herself, nor allow Mr. Elliott to join in a match.

The stray curates had attempted to be facetious; and nothing disgusts strangers so much as facetiousness from young people

of no note whatever. And at supper it was even worse.

The accurate Eliza Blight *plumped* down into a seat specially reserved next to Sibyl Loraine for Crawford Ffrancks; and Jane Tweedy had fastened herself on to young Carteret, and bored him to death about a Zulu Kaffir who was on his way, she hoped, to heaven, *viâ* Exeter Hall.

Captain Carteret was so nearly driven wild by her that, before he escaped, he had promised to take tickets for some exhibition the Zulu proposed making of himself at Rippleford, and had given her five shillings towards defraying "Sleeko's" tailor's bill.

Though Mr. Traill and Mrs. Loraine had thoroughly enjoyed a long chat together, and had agreed how charming it must be to have Lady Vansittart's power of making others happy; and Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy had had more than a fair share of the lobster

aspics for which Mitcham was so famous, the party had been a failure, as Sir Augustus had declared.

"It is absurd," Lady Vansittart thought, as she laid aside, bit by bit, the "devilish beauty" of which we have tried to give our readers an idea, "what an immense amount of influence one such chit as Madge Burleigh has, directly and indirectly, in a neighbourhood so entirely as it seems my own. A girl has only to be a perfect contrast to a man's mother and sisters, and he thinks her divine at once! It is too bad to blame me for her absence. Much as I hate the whole Vernon and Burleigh party, I'm sure I wish they had come. Goodness knows how weary I am growing of it all."

Sir Augustus might perhaps have spoken less abruptly, and in milder terms, if he had only known that behind his mother's terrible mask of *rouge et noir* there was a pale, grey,

weary woman, tired of her long struggle with time and personal deceits, longing for ever so little rest, ever so little love, ever so little courage to meet *the Inevitable*—old age and death.

CHAPTER XIX.

"I WILL STAND THIS NO LONGER."

"She's beautiful, and therefore to be woo'd;
She is a woman, therefore to be won."
SHAKESPEARE (1 *King Henry VI.*, Act v., sc. 3).

MISS BURLEIGH had very early shown a remarkable talent for music. Even as the "little horror," so detested by Mrs. Blight, it had been her wont to sing in her pure, sweet young soprano, any of the old-fashioned ditties delighted in by Mr. Burleigh and her mother whenever she was bid to sing.

Ariel's songs from the "Tempest," many sweet old airs from Dr. Arne's "Artaxerxes," and some few gems from Mozart's "Don Gio-

vanni" were known to Margaret Burleigh by heart, and could be given with or without accompaniments, if she might stand by her father's chair, and have his kisses from time to time to encourage her.

And later, Miss Burleigh of Pendrills had been the delight of a dear old German singing-master, who grew sick of the smoke and noise of London, and had established himself to enjoy quiet, and flowers, and a few pupils among the *élite* of the neighbourhood round Lynn. He had known how to encourage Margaret's natural taste, and to foster and develop the purest resources of her talent.

The melody of Miss Burleigh's voice came, as it were, truly from her heart; it needed neither grimace nor pretence of any kind to make it flow—sweet and rich as honey.

She sang at her friends' request as she would have given them any other pleasure

in her power—her flowers, or her books to look at.

The early habit of her childhood had grown up with her growth; never did a sweet singer use her talent more generously.

And yet this sweet singer admired every one else's talents too much to be content, much less conceited, with her own great gift.

"I cannot 'aggravate my voice,' as Bottom, the weaver, boasted he could, mamma. He, you know, could 'roar you like any lion,' and could 'roar you as gently as any sucking dove.' I envy that unfeeling pussy-cat, Grace Loraine, her power of drawing tears into my eyes with those full yet trembling notes of hers. It is a trick, I do believe; but I wish I could learn it," Madge said, turning from her piano to Mrs. Burleigh's favourite summer seat—a sofa by the doors of the conservatory.

Mrs. Burleigh was used to being harangued, as she laughingly called it, by her darling, so she just smiled as she remarked:

"As for learning any trick from Grace Loraine, you would surely draw tears from my eyes, darling, if you did;" and she went on counting the stitches of a new pattern of knitting that had the charms of novelty, perversity, and ultimate incomprehensibility to recommend it.

"I think I shall give up my singing and take to the study of Hebrew, or conic sections, or astronomy, or something that nobody else here understands or can rival me in. I hate doing what I do worse than other girls do. I do not believe my hard-hearted mother cares for my mortifications, nor for my confidences. One dropped stitch is more to her than her only daughter—this morning at all events," Madge said merrily.

"I cannot let my darling give up her sing-

ing," Mrs. Burleigh said, as all the truants had appeared at muster on her needle, and that exciting row was over. "It is one of the delights of my old age, and Guy——"

"Mamma, you must not talk of old age."

"Then let me talk of Guy, my dear. I wish very much to speak of Guy Vernon."

"Guy—Guy; for ever Guy!" Madge said, rising from her seat and preparing to run away from the embarrassing subject. "I do believe it is your fault, mamma, that odious Mrs. Blight spreads such wicked reports of my trying to 'catch' him! If you love Guy so much, I do wish you could marry him!"

"Fie, Madge! That is not my Madge!"

"Mrs. Blight, ma'am, and the young ladies," the butler announced, throwing open the door, and standing in their detested presence as stiff and staring as a kilted effigy at a tobacconist's door.

After a depressed chorus of "How-do-you do? thank you, and you?" Mrs. Burleigh drew her old Indian shawl round her, as Mrs. Blight so *detested* to see her do, and longed to ask "what she meant by it?"

And then the whole party expressed their surprise at the usual caprices of the sun, and the winds, and the weather generally.

"Hardly summer, yet too hot for spring; chilly, too, in the shade; and the wind cold enough to wear sealskin driving," Mrs. Blight declared. "There was sickness in the village, too; there always was,"—still she could not understand it.

Once off her line, scandal, Mrs. Blight was almost nervous, and had to be gently started afresh on innocent topics by her gentle hostess; while Miss Burleigh laboured hard to entertain the uncongenial Eliza, and the almost unknown Louisa Blight.

Early tea was ordered, and a large part of the visit went down, as a nauseous powder might, with a little liquid. But still Mrs. Blight sat on, and on, and on, and had nearly learnt Mrs. Burleigh's new stitch before she left, and had counted "twenty-eight wax candles in all in Mrs. Burleigh's drawing-room. There were three in each girandole—that makes eighteen, and six on the mantel-piece in the candelabra to match, and two on the writing-table, and two on the violin-stand; oh! and two on the piano—that makes thirty. So she must be going to have people to dinner, or she must be living at a nice rate; and no doubt Mr. Vernon would come to be sung to by Miss Madge. Hateful, sly minx! There she sat, in some sort of a grey serge dress, made all down in one piece, without a band, to show her figure, no doubt. If you had any *nous* about you, you two girls might copy that dress; it was as

simple as a dress could be, and nothing could be better for every-day country wear."

"Why do you go and waste your time on people you dislike so much?" Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy asked with asperity; for Mrs. Burleigh had hitherto carefully avoided making that lady's acquaintance, and Pendrills was a sore subject to her.

"Because everybody of any standing at all visits them and is asked there," Mrs. Blight hastened to tell her friend.

"Oh woman! woman!" Mr. Traill had been moved to say in his trouble, when he had found a text that would have admonished his two uneasy parishioners, as he would fain have done, "'Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in anywise to do evil.'"

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"I will stand this no longer," Guy Vernon said to himself while dressing for the dinner at Mrs. Burleigh's that Mrs. Blight had

clearly foreseen, from the number of wax candles in the girandoles at Pendrills when she called. "I will stand no more nonsense. This very night I will bring this outrageous state of things to an end. If I have done anything to offend her, Madge shall speak out. If not, she shall give me back the rights of an old friend, and some dearer still—or——" Mr. Vernon left the threat floating in a dim future, and devoted himself to his personal adornment with unwonted energy. "I don't think I have a scrap of personal vanity about me," he thought, and very fairly; "and I have seen fellows twice as ugly as I am, with wives as pretty comparatively as Madge. I wish I knew how they got them. When she looks at me with that half-surprised, half-mischievous look of hers, I feel as if I was a lout, and all my limbs hang as if they were dislocated. If I could only once get her to *care* for me *properly*—I

am sure I could make her happier than any one else. If I only knew what the fairy liked——— This very evening," he said to himself with determination, giving a last persuasive touch to his cravat, "as soon as she goes to her ferns, and our mothers take up their incomprehensible knitting, and their good gentle little friend, Miss Ryles, fidgets round the spirit-lamp to make tea, I will follow Madge and have it out with her."

While Guy Vernon was holding desperate counsel with his own fears at The Cedars, Madge and Sibyl Loraine were prattling under cover of their glossy long locks, as they dressed for dinner in Madge's own room facing the Lime Avenue, where the trees were just beginning to unroll their silky leaflets to the balmy April air. It was to be quite a surprise to Guy finding Miss Loraine there. We may be quite sure it would be, and that it would disconcert all his plans

greatly; but the girls imagined nothing of his desperate resolve, and talked him over in their kindliest manner.

"He has not an enemy in the world except Mrs. Blight," Madge said, after vowing she would "get from him enough *Gloire de Dijon* roses on their own roots to supply her from May to January, and some rare ferns, too, only to be had from the gardener at The Chase, for Sibyl. "Mrs. Blight *will* talk of him as *wild*, and then sets about collecting evidence to justify herself; and then people believe that she knows more than any one else, and so her suspicions are repeated as facts."

Madge tossed back all her sunburnt rippled locks as she spoke, and turned a face glowing with honest anger to her friend for sympathy. "The old saying that 'evil communications corrupt good manners,' should be quoted as destroying good faith," she went

on, waxing eloquent against the detested Mrs. Blight. "The poison of scandal works so strangely; one may *hate* to believe it, and even *disbelieve* it, but it clings to us and creeps away into one's heart and hides there, and then at some unhappy moment of doubt it comes out again and kills our faith in a true friend even, and for ever."

"She is like a hornet," said Sibyl Loraine; "and when she settles down to sting, one does not know how much poison she may leave—one may almost die of her. But what has she been doing to Mr. Vernon?" Sibyl asked.

"She has been *doing* nothing, but *saying* all that is most disagreeable," answered Madge. "She makes it nearly impossible to be happy with Guy any longer."

So it was Mrs. Blight's doing after all. Matters had indeed become very serious of late between Guy and Madge Burleigh. She

never had a smile to give him now. She managed, he hardly knew how, to avoid talking to him, or even shaking hands with him. She would fling her merry "How-do-you do," or "Good-evening, Guy," all across the room to him, and then entrench herself behind persons or things impossible to outflank.

Some of Mrs. Blight's cruel suspicions must have reached Madge, and the girl was scared, and pained more deeply than Guy could have believed possible.

Guy had such an honest affection for his lovely playfellow. He rather feared her scornful little ways, it is true ; but he heartily admired her brightness and her honesty, as well as her beauty ; and he longed, in his take-it-for-granted quiet way, for her affection in return.

Being six-feet-two, with a grand but unwieldy body, an imperturbable temper, and

tawny hair, he could not fail of being enslaved sooner or later by a bewitching, fairy-like, nut-brown maid of five-feet-three, with "a temper of her own."

Indeed it had long been an understood thing that Guy Vernon had offered himself to Madge Burleigh, or to her mother perhaps for her, as a much easier person to confide in, and was allowed to try to win her; and on Sibyl's return from Greyminster she found that a wall of reserve had grown up between her friends, and that Mrs. Blight had made it "nearly impossible to be happy with Guy any longer;" while Mrs. Blight herself said it was the suspense that was intolerable to Rippleford generally.

"If it was settled, one way or the other, it would be better for every one," she had declared over and over again, almost with tears in her eyes, thinking of her own unmarried daughters, and of the beautiful

Chase, and of "poor old Sir Henry's rapidly failing health."

"And Miss Burleigh pretends not to know why he is always in attendance on Mrs. Burleigh wherever she goes. It is shameful," said one of Mrs. Blight's few sympathising gossips.

"I believe it is all clever acting on her part. Nothing charms some men—*rich men*—so much as perfect indifference," Mrs. MacBeggah Tweedy declared; while *her* daughters, it must be confessed, were far behind their mother in knowledge of practical moral philosophy.

* * * * *

"Is there anything wrong between you and Madge, my son?" gentle Mrs. Vernon ventured to ask, as Guy opened the wicket-gate under the beautiful silver birches by the brook, to let her pass from her own grounds into the woods of Pendrills. The first view

of the bright house, with all its windows open, and the air of beauty and rejoicing that a well-kept country home acquires in a warm spring evening, brought with it a flood of hopes for her son and the beloved little neighbour whose greeting kiss was so often given to her, breathlessly, after a chase down the velvet lawns to the brook. "She has changed towards us both. She never comes flying out to welcome us now. Has she any other fancy, do you think?"

"For heaven's sake, mother," said poor Guy, with a rush of blood to his face, "don't take such cruel fancies into your head, or if you do, don't tell me of them."

"I won't; but it is so difficult not to speak of a thing one is always thinking about, Guy."

And Guy said again, as he followed his mother into the great music-room, and saw his tormentor come forward with Sibyl Loraine

from a low deep sofa in one of the window recesses overlooking the garden, where she *must* have seen his mother's approach from the wicket-gate :

"I will stand this no longer !"

CHAPTER XX.

"'NOBODY AXED YOU, SIR!' SHE SAID."

"Better not be at all than not be noble."

TENNYSON (*Princess*).

"I TRUST your sister's marriage is all Mrs. Loraine can wish?" Guy Vernon said to Sibyl, abruptly turning what would have been hearty joy-wishing into a bald inquiry; for he saw a shadow of sadness flit over Sibyl's frank face even as he grasped her hand in greeting; and how could he tell Mrs. Blight's malevolent reports to be the cause of it?

"Honestly, no," Sibyl answered; and then hastily added, "It pains my mother very much

to have to part with Grace so suddenly, and to a stranger."

"I am sorry. I thought you had known Mr. Elliott a long time, and liked him well."

All they had known of him was as the supposed admirer of the Bishop's gentle daughter Beatrice. There was nothing for it but silence, so Sibyl held her peace. Not so the impetuous Madge.

"Sibyl," she said in her clear young voice, "knows about as much of Mr. Elliott as *we* do of Barabbas! And that, you know, is summed up in those terror-striking words, '*Now Barabbas was a robber!*'"

"Madge, my dear love, Madge!" Mrs. Burleigh cried deprecatingly from her favourite chimney-corner sofa, where she sat in peaceful confab with her dear friend Mrs. Vernon.

"But on the 25th we are to put on wedding garments. 'The robber' holds a marriage

masquerade that morning in our dear little old church. The Bishop and the Dean, and a great gang of ecclesiastics will be there; some very good characters and some very bad, for you and I are to be there, Guy," the saucy girl continued. "But dear Mr. Traill, I am happy to say, will not be there; his poor dying friend in London detains him."

"Don't let us talk about it, Madge," Sibyl said. "I have so longed to possess a brother, and my one chance ends in—Henry Elliott."

* * * * *

"How provoking girls can be sometimes," Mrs. Burleigh whispered to Mrs. Vernon. "In good hands there are not two more tractable and generous girls than Madge and Sibyl."

"You know in whose hands *I* wish your Madge to be, my dear," said Mrs. Vernon in an answering whisper.

"If she does not in the end admit Guy's

noble qualities and love him," said generous Mrs. Burleigh, "I shall believe she is not my child."

* * * * *

The probable difficulty of carrying war into his fair enemy's camp, while her ally Sibyl was near her, preoccupied Guy a good deal.

His carving at dinner, for which he usually received Mrs. Burleigh's thanks, mingled with praises, was certainly nothing to boast of; the young ducklings, meant to be a surprise and treat in company with the earliest peas in Rippleford, were dismembered by Guy with force in place of skill, and came at last as cold and clammy to the guests as a mere tyro could have sent them.

His replies to the conversation addressed to him were by no means as brilliant as he wished them to be, and his efforts to roll the ball of conversation, when it stopped with him, were desperate slips or miserable misses. And all the

while Madge sat radiant at the farther end of the table, and never let slip any opportunity of giving him a "sly pat with her claws out," as she always called her contrariness, when she could do so without showing malice prepense.

But Guy's spirit had now been fairly roused. He was not going to flinch. He was kindness itself to Sibyl, whose presence so disturbed his plans. He promised his choicest ferns and all the Gloire de Dijon roses Madge could possibly desire. He volunteered his mother's carriage should take Sibyl home, a trap into which the sweet old lady, his mother, fell eagerly; and at last the game, he felt, was in his own hands; for after Sibyl's departure Madge took her way into the conservatory, and repassed the great glass doors on her way to the fernery with her tiny watering-pot with the longest spout and most delicate rose, to give her favourites a spray-shower as her "good-night."

Guy had often and often helped her at this work; and if the truth may be told, had once or twice received the last imperceptible sprinkle on the top of his leonine crest.

Very Hebe-like he thought she looked, raised on her pretty tip-toes, with her arm curved high above her face, when this merry mischief had been perpetrated. How pleasant it would all be if the merry playfellow had not suddenly grown into such a dignified little princess.

He longed to tell her no end of things; but then she must be willing to listen. He longed to offer her his whole honest heart; but at that moment it seemed to have stuck hard and fast in his throat, in size and substance even as a cricket-ball.

Never was spirit more willing, or flesh more weak. But there should be no trifling now, no delay; if only his voice would come past that lump in his throat.

He would be very earnest at first, very

loving afterwards, if he could but transfer his tremor to her; and so he spoke, and startled himself by the gruffness of his call, meant to be a half-playful one.

"Miss Burleigh."

"Mr. Vernon," she answered, pitching her voice to the most ghostly key she could manage in return.

"I have come to have some very serious conversation with you. May I beg you to listen seriously?"

"I really cannot, Guy, unless you speak more like yourself, and look less like the marble man in 'Don Giovanni.'"

"Can you never be serious—never think before you speak whether it hurts a fellow or not, Madge?"

"As for never thinking," answered Madge, "I am always thinking."

"When?" he asked in despair, to gain a moment's time to set his appeal in order.

"When you are lounging about at The Chase, and there is no one here to disturb or vex me. Then I coil myself up in the west window-seat in the old playroom, and think out my thoughts of as many shapes and shades as there are clouds about the sunsets. It is as good as blowing great rainbow-tinted soap-bubbles, Guy. My thoughts float and float out of my heart, away, away into the dusk!"

"Nonsense," said Guy. "I call that nonsense."

"Delightful! With all due deference to your opinion, I call that delightful!" Madge answered.

"What do you think of?" asked her greatly-bothered companion.

"Of you very often," she frankly said.

"What about me?" He spoke eagerly and gently enough now, for this was something like an opening for the interesting matter he had come to talk of.

"You will think me rude if I tell you," Madge said, with a wickedly sweet smile.

"Not at all, dear Madge. Tell me, tell me!"

"Well, then, of how big and strong and useless you are. It seems to me so strange that any man can bear to be famous only for his size or his fortune, or for what he can't help, whatever it may be. "If I was a man I would *do* something, *be* somebody in my day. I would leave my mark, a good mark, too, if only on the soil on which I was born."

"You are talking very fast of what you don't understand," Guy panted out in his annoyance.

"There! now you are angry, Guy."

"I am *not* angry, not in the least; only it is difficult to argue with a woman without losing one's calmness. All men find that at times."

"Well, if you own it, I'll forgive you, Guy."

"I own nothing. I wish you would listen. When a man has been brought up to no profession, it is next to impossible at my age to find employment. I do all that I can at The Chase."

"Oh, nonsense, Guy. You rear tame pheasants, and you play at squire among the half-starved labourers; and make little orations to them and their miserable families, and tell them how thankful they ought to be when God blesses Sir Henry's barns to overflowing with a glorious harvest. Though after toiling a whole year what do they get of his plenty? Only what they steal. But if *I* was a man, that is not what *I* would do."

"It is easy to boast. What would *you* do?"

"I would *turn-to* as working-bailiff or overseer, or something or other, to prevent Sir

Henry and his poor working-men from being cheated by rogues, set between him and them." Madge spoke now as gravely as possible. "I would improve all the cottages, and build more. I would have readings, and music, and dancing; and hold marriage feasts, and christening feasts, and flower-shows for the cottagers: not only beer, beer, beer—for ever beer—without food, or friendship, or sympathy. I would share my plenty and my pleasures. Oh, I am out of breath, or I would tell you much more that I would do if *I* were *you*. And you do nothing and are nobody!"

A pleasant hearing this, for a man who came to offer himself as a heart's idol to the lady of his choice.

"Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?"

Guy thought decidedly not.

"If this is all you can think of an old friend and playfellow, Madge, it would be

madness to tell you all I came to say to-night.

"'Nobody axed you, sir!' she said," Madge sang. Setting down her watering-pot, she locked her pretty hands before her, and twirled her thumbs, and dropped him a swift little *curtsy* in the approved rustic-maiden manner.

Guy turned on his heel without having heart to return the naughty girl's mocking salute, and strode off to the woods on his way home, with his heart full of bitterness.

"How they all spoil Guy," thought Madge as she watched his dim retreating figure into the denser gloom of the beech woods beyond the brook. "He expects to be admired and loved without doing anything to deserve it. If he drops into the easiest chair in the room and stares at one for an hour or two, he thinks he must be making himself agreeable. If he gives a little money, which costs

him nothing, for he does not want it himself, to our poor people, he is called generous and charitable. And my mother and his mother praise him to the skies, and he is satisfied with being so praised—for nothing! *I* try to fascinate!—*I* try to catch him! I should like to run a goad into him, to shake him, to pinch him, to wake his soul! Poor old Guy."

But as Guy disappeared into the wood, the hands unclasped and fell limp, the bright eyes filled, the scornful lips quivered, and Madge went her way upstairs to kiss her mother good-night silently, with a penitent suspicion that she had no right to run in the goad, nor to give the shake, nor the pinch, nor to set herself up as wiser and better than dear old Guy, merely because her tongue could run faster than his, or because she saw, as she supposed, a nobler course open for him than the one he was plodding so peacefully.

And while Guy imagined her in all the saucy enjoyment of her victory, she was sad and remorseful from the pain of his defeat.

END OF VOL. I.

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